A TANGLE OF DOUBLE BINDS: POSTMODERN DISCOURSE ON SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN NOVEL

By

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To my loving wife, parents, and rather large family: May you all enjoy lives of learning, so that you are apt to teach one another. Thanks for teaching me to love, laugh, and live by the Holy Spirit!
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A TANGLE OF DOUBLE BINDS: POSTMODERN DISCOURSE ON SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN NOVEL

By
John Lovell Glenn

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A Tangle of Double Binds: Postmodern Discourse on Social Movements in the African American Novel examines the ways in which novels by African American writers have interrogated fifties and sixties black social movements. Within the context of postmodernism, I analyze the portrayal of several cultural and philosophical tensions that emerged out of concerns for racial equality and justice.

I argue that the social changes occurring during the mid-twentieth century in America have impacted African Americans in two ways. For example, the first involves the cultural and generational tensions surfacing in black communities throughout the Civil Rights Movement. Second, the rights gained as a result of civic struggles, while contributing to the accessibility of mainstream sectors, have come at a high social cost to black individuals. In addition, these shifts result in a social dynamic that I describe as a double bind, in which an individual coming of age must not only negotiate the constraints of in-group traditions but also must navigate his or her way through repressive institutions in mainstream society.

Ultimately, the novels I cover in this project constitute discourses on postmodernity and black social movements. In particular, African American writers
have developed men and women protagonists who deploy a self-concept that embraces the social fragmentation rife in the contemporary era. With this perspective, I give close readings of the following texts: Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist*, Alice Walker’s *Meridian*, John Oliver Killens’s *The Cotillion: Or, One Good Bull is Half the Herd*, and Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*. Throughout this project, I seek to answer the following questions: How have contemporary black writers grappled with the socioeconomic changes in American society since the 1960s? What are the implications of rights movements for postmodern society? And how have particular movements impacted individual autonomy among African Americans? Finally, my reading of each text is organized around the protagonists who enact forms of resistance that hedge against problematic group practices and stave off cooptation in hegemonic American systems.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* is a novel about cultural wholeness and healing. Bambara initiates a journey toward alternatives to dominant American norms, which plays out in spiritual, social, and political matters. Throughout the novel, Velma Henry seeks wholeness while guided by Minnie Ransom, a healer in the Claybourne community. A mother, a Civil Rights activist, and an employee at Transchemical (a chemical plant outside the Claybourne), Velma’s condition is the result of a failed suicide attempt. Even prior to this, her efforts prove to be self-sabotaging. In one scene, Velma participates in a brutal protest march that leaves her sullied and outraged. At the end of the march, a charismatic Civil Rights leader pulls up in a limo: “He looked a bit like King, had a delivery similar to Malcolm’s, dressed like Stokely, had glasses like Rap, but she’d never heard him say anything useful or offensive” (35). This experience compels Velma to deride the insulated male leadership of Claybourne’s activist community and to encourage the female counterpart Women for Action to go their separate way. Velma’s actions represent an ideological struggle in which she resists the hemmed in nature of social striving in the community and vies for agency outside the confines of the Brotherhood’s interests.

Moreover, the tensions surrounding the Transchemical Company are also part of her struggle, as some believe the plant threatens to contaminate the town with radioactive waste or destroy the Infirmary because activists in the Movement are “collecting information about conditions at the plant” (71). Significantly, Transchemical has provided employment opportunity to previous generations of black workers and, even with its suspect practices, Velma works there. Her inaction against the company
makes her complicit with the dominant system that uses its foothold on black employment to obscure its corrupt environmental practices. Still, Velma’s conundrum in the midst of her effort to recover is that she hopes to remedy her splintering reality: “Something crucial had been missing from the political/ economic/ social/ cultural/ aesthetic/ military/ psychosocial/ psychological/ psychosexual mix” (259). But near the end of the narrative, Velma becomes more cognizant of her decenteredness from “the best of her people’s traditions” and recognizes that she has become “anesthetized by dazzling performances with somebody else’s aesthetic…” (258).

When the stress of her endeavors nearly brings about her demise, Velma imagines the modern sociopolitical status quo—which consists of group striving, self-sacrifice and burdensome caretaking—coming apart at the seams. Velma’s recovery speaks to an alternative to this modern paradigm, in that she retools the strivings of her foremothers and forefathers and asserts herself. She no longer tries to flee her fragmentation but embraces her brokenness, laughs at her entire ordeal, and stands to her feet without Minnie’s help at the end of the novel. Ultimately, Bambara’s exploration of the challenges emerging during the Civil Rights Movement reveals the strategic sense of self Velma must marshal to negotiate the untenable dynamic between her community activism and her company position and not become incapacitated by either.

Depicting the polarizing nature of in-group political concerns and mainstream entities in connection with the sway of black social movements, Bambara’s The Salt Eaters features the social situation that I illuminate in this study. In the late twentieth century, African American novels have rejected racial transcendence for a full-on circumspection of the complexities of history and postmodernity. Inasmuch as novelists
like Bambara speak to issues of uncertainty and instability, they reflect the critical vacillation around conceptions of history within theories of postmodernism.

In light of the terrain I think African American postmodernism must traverse, I examine the ways writers look back at black social movements of the mid-twentieth century. Laying claim to perspectives on the profound shifts in black culture that helped set in motion postmodern conditions, artists and intellectuals have written commentary on a number of debates, namely in the arenas of race, political culture, education, cultural tradition, class, gender, and work in urban environments. They also tease out discourses on highly visible social movements from Desegregation, the Civil Rights Movement, and Black Cultural Nationalism to the post-Civil Rights era. My project claims that writers delve into the exteriority of these social movements to extract efficient wisdoms and strategies for negotiating late twentieth century challenges. To ascertain these challenges, I ask questions about the observations writers make: Why does so much thematic content revolve around sixties social movements? Why does a consideration of the hegemonic forces at work in society take center stage? and Why have authors presented the shirking off of burdensome intraracial sensibilities and the skillful maneuvering through oppressive systems as part of their repertoire? The answers to these questions largely demonstrate postmodernist sensibilities. Still, even as postmodernity problematizes essential categories, new formations follow from the motivated undertakings of writers highlighting the discursive nature of constructions like race, class, and gender, even as they give attention to the material reality underpinning these concepts.
Thinking through the portrayal of social movements in African American literature, I make the claim that the upheavals of fifties and sixties black social movements not only resulted in the accessibility of more opportunities and identifications for African Americans but also came with a number of challenges to blacks’ ability to come to terms with a distinct set of circumstances. In the following texts, Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* (1999), Alice Walker’s *Meridian* (1976), John Oliver Killens’s *The Cotillion: Or, One Good Bull is Half the Herd* (1971), and Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby* (1981), each author takes as his or her backdrop a given social movement or references the impact of a cause célèbre. Even as writers explore the larger ambiance of these movements, they hone in on the routine struggle for autonomy by middle and working class men and women protagonists. My argument is that these works provide a rich discourse because they identify tensions around in-group burdens and institutional domination.

In this project, I study texts that portray ambitious characters in their negotiation of group tradition (within families or communities) and the maneuvers they make in society, usually in workplaces, educational sites, or governing institutions. I include the aforementioned texts because the protagonists within them not only seek out self-knowledge but also they are situated in conditions that require the navigation of the institutional structures upon which they depend for stable living. Even though a celebrated postmodern text like Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* traffics in a number of cultural ideologies, I exclude it because it does not situate its protagonists in the midst of negotiating the practicality of these frameworks. Rather, I focus on novels that feature the symbiotic strivings of men and women protagonists while portraying social movements and building complexity around the advancements made. Within the
context of African American literature, writers imagine a cache of standpoints through which to challenge the status quo of mainstream bias and group consensus and thwart sociopolitical co-optation in both situations.

**What Will Postmodernism Do With History?**

Debates over how best to delineate African American postmodernism have enjoined theorists of postmodern cultural studies to centralize African American social reality. Critics have argued that if nothing else postmodernism is certainly inflected by black cultural production, artistic autonomy, a politics of difference, and an expanding black critical presence.¹ However, because several theories localize, residualize, and marginalize the experiences of people of color, African American postmodernism approaches black experiences in contexts that frame the world differently than Eurocentric paradigms. Evaluating such contexts as they emerge in black literature, critics are assessing print culture and its limited capacity for racial representation; recognizing culturally-specific experience; analyzing notions of fragmented subjectivity and psychic decenteredness; and foregrounding numerous African American cultural paradigms.²

African American postmodernism, in delineating its own epistemologies, is not only informing widely read postmodernist theories but also mapping its wider concern for social realities and history. Wahneema Lubiano compels critics attention toward serious

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¹ See Cornel West’s “Postmodernity and Afro-America” (168-170) and bell hooks’s “Postmodern Blackness” (24-29).

² See Phillip Brian Harper’s *Framing the Margins* (12-13); Madhu Dubey’s *Black Literary Postmodernism* (40); W. Lawrence Hogue’s *Race, Modernity, Postmodernity* (16-25); and *The African American Male, Writing, and Difference* (18-19).
reflection on a key issue: the "insist[ence] on the representation of history in the present moment" (157). A number of studies seem to share Lubiano’s concern for history but to varying extents. Jameson’s extensive theory of postmodernism sees one characteristic of postmodern aesthetic consumption as a loss of historicity, in which we can no longer conceptualize history as a meaningful means to understand the present. Jameson offers us a degraded historicism, which holds out little hope for history’s referential significance in contemporary times—it being a casualty of the “breakdown of the signifying chain” and reduced in language to “a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (x-27). Linda Hutcheon sees postmodern cultural production as historical and critical due to its interaction with discourses of the past. Her term historiographic metafiction corresponds to narratives, which ironize and problematize history through parodic reference “by stressing the [discursive] contexts in which the fiction is being produced—by both writer and reader” (40). Just as these two accounts tend to see postmodernism as chiefly oppositional to previous cultural and aesthetic formations, others want to situate postmodernism within a Eurocentric, ahistorical system of meaning and point of reference. In Cornel West’s view “the postmodernism debate has remained inscribed within narrow disciplinary boundaries, [and] insulated artistic practices […]. The time has come for this debate to be moved more forthrightly into social theory and historiography” (392). Still, what precludes such discussions is tendency toward tropological readings of sociohistorical reference and an emphasis on

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3 According to John N. Duvall in “[h]istory is unquestionably one of the most contentious areas of debate among those concerned with postmodernism” (“Troping History” 1). While Duvall critiques Jameson’s and Hutcheon’s accounts of history in postmodernism for preferring high cultural artifacts and drawing from architectural history to discuss aesthetic production respectively, he does see them as a “useful starting point for thinking about contemporary representation” (20).
pastiche and the parodic referencing of history in contemporary cultural production. Without consideration of material cost or larger cultural concerns—the necessary move to understanding any cultural apparatus—a discipline like African American postmodernism could not succeed in its intent to cultivate paradigms that have the potential to move criticism forward with attention to notions of generative historicity around incessant determination.

Cautioning against the elevation of African American postmodernism as a critical site devoid of problematic notions about cultural experience, Lubiano explains it this way: “It seems to me more useful to think of African American postmodernism as a way to negotiate particular material circumstances in order to attempt some constructions of justice[….] It theorizes ways that prevent engagement with differences from concretizing into intellectually and politically static categories” (157-158). For Lubiano, static constructions—the tools used in postmodernist discourse to generalize about the exteriority of cultural difference—largely ignore the ways African Americans conceptualize the disadvantages they face in society. Lubiano argues that African American literary postmodernism continues “working over the conflicted ground of discourse genealogies” so as to not only reprove and resist the dominant discourse but also to theorize the complexities of African American social engagement throughout the late twentieth century.

To resist the residual construction of black culture as other, Madhu Dubey suggests that cultural studies must give attention to the racialized, structural and systemic challenges facing African Americans by considering the uneven development that has emerged as a result (9); by looking to what we know socially of the operative
class politics in contemporary American society and the issue of less access to political power (Harper 12); and by positing concrete and translatable experiences, not abstraction, as a basis for black postmodern cultural politics (hooks 29).

While the aforementioned critical material concerns itself with much neglected social realities that serve to distinguish black postmodernism from the insular constructions proffered by dominant theories, I see a need to consider systemic inequality in light of the understandings embedded within untapped cultural narratives. We might stretch the limits of African American critical discourses by discerning the lessons from historically seminal conflicts whose insights can be applied to contemporary situations. To arrive at this point, critics will need to reject the artificial phenomena installed by academic tenets between one’s negotiation of individuality as it concerns group identity and one’s navigation of his or her position in mainstream society.

In order to guard African American postmodernism against a degraded historicism, it is essential to disabuse ourselves of the task of over-defining or properly designating postmodernity in its multiple iterations. The key is to utilize its explanatory power, pairing it with social science, literary theory, philosophical discourses, and political science, and then discerning a sense of the representation of history in the present as Lubiano recommends. We must treat seriously not only history but also the interdisciplinary nature of African American postmodernism and open up our interrogations to the meanings posited within womanism, feminism, Afro-diasporic paradigms and globalizing theories. Much of the blanketing conceptions in theories of postmodernism conveniently ignore the particularity of cultural difference and the fact
that different minority groups live out a relationship to late capitalism’s excesses that is distinct from the experiences of nonminority Americans. A move toward attention to concrete experience can spark thoughtful considerations of the on-the-ground contestations and strivings of minority groups. Even as critics observe political and cultural struggles, they must generate analyses of the deceptively unpretentious epistemologies that emerge out of such tense endeavors, which aim to foster anti-establishment, postcolonial, and countercultural vantage points. While avoiding residual constructions is key, to gain a broader sense of the dynamics of local and global struggles, whose far-reaching results spill onto society at large, we must avoid underestimating the influence of social movements. In my thinking, the latter must take center stage in the reassertion of history as a viable means of inquiry in contemporary African American postmodernism. Such a move is important because it demonstrates how the everyday is often given a cursory glance rather than engaged in a way that invites social scientific observations, political economy, and literary-critical insight.

Sites of cursory reference can become the grounds upon which critics make concrete, yet fluid, constructions utilizing several theoretical, macro/micropolitical reference points to enhance a deeper sense of cultural perspective. While deconstructing and situating these perspectives around issues like exploitation, self-degradation, hegemony, ideology, overdetermination, and racial tradition, in my view, the challenge is avoiding constructions that stifle critical reflection and curtail the introduction of new positions for postmodernism. Problems can arise if critics fall back to the familiar discourses and usual presuppositions. Those belonging to a seemingly hermetic Euro-American cultural perspective enjoy dominance, and therefore, have the
space to conceive of periodizing temporalities with scant consideration of subaltern epistemologies and circumstances—in particular, historical movements like Civil Rights and Black Nationalism that have disrupted repressive conditions. My sense in this project is that the lessons we may derive from such a history are still very much intact in postmodern culture.

African American postmodernism, where it intersects with literary and cultural studies, can engage the insight that past civic movements have to offer. In this way, historicity will not become a despised logic in critical discourse nor a mere phenomenon divorced from social context. African American postmodernism can and should revive historicity. In short, critics do this by offering new theories that are approachable as points of departure into conversations about the ways cultural difference from the mythical norm plays out in spaces that are traversed daily. The truth of the matter is that African American postmodernism must interrogate its own truth-claims about ideologies of cultural value, black culture in the sphere of history, and notions of the real (Dubey 11-13).

**Autonomy and the Politics of the Double Bind**

My project accounts for a double bind in American social relations that has resonated with African American writers in the late twentieth century. I do not use the term double-bind in my title phrase to signal a fixed binary of sorts but to highlight the tangle of exploitations, trappings, and fragmentations identifiable in postmodern culture and society. Moreover, the heterogeneous connections between one situation and then another are not so easily distinguished. Therefore, I am concerned with why this social reality manifests in a cycle in which mainstream institutions move to exploit individuals while group traditions confine them, and why this dynamic registers in the lives of
individuals in the process of adopting paradigms that are more suitable than those offered in either space. Generations bequeathed the strivings of sixties social movements have experienced “weakened ties” (Hogue 14) to racial tradition, finding themselves beset by an increasingly accessible, yet binding, social reality. Since the late 1960s, African American literature has engaged the possibility of maneuvering through black cultural institutions and dominant organizations and has clarified the unwitting crosscurrents between them. Novelists have grappled with the sense that sixties social movements had the effect of setting a monolithic agenda for divergent black communities and restricting the autonomy of individuals. Even as critics come to terms with the significance of mid-twentieth century U.S. transformations, the issues of sociocultural equity and political justice hinge on individual autonomy.

In the mid-twentieth century, American politics underwent a sea change as a result of the influence of Civil Rights, economic volatility, and political infighting. Those transformations culminated in a crisis of autonomy, which largely registered within marginalized communities. As a result, the 1960s witnessed an uptick in public policy geared toward addressing civil issues. However, by 1970, Johnson’s War on Poverty had ended as economic stagnation began to set in. At this point, American politics lacked consensus and the nation’s uncertain course regarding race relations illustrated this. Writing about consensus in political affairs, Jean Francois Lyotard observed that “invention is always born of dissension” (xxv). To Lyotard’s point, the growing discontentment with inequality bolstered 1970s counterculture.4 While at the federal

4 For information on the seventies’ revision of America, the sixties’ interpretation of America, and an overview of the countercultural movements that held over in the seventies, see Bruce Schulman’s The
level, backlash surfaced from politicians cynical about government social spending and by the changing racial landscape, at the local level, New Left radicals challenged liberalism through the political empowerment of the poor and disenfranchised. Moreover, grassroots movements challenging the status quo served the unique purpose of cultivating a bottom-up critical mass willing to voice the concerns among minority groups and to act on them. As a result, the issue of autonomy became a driving force in postmodernity.

As American politics has historically foundered on the interests of marginalized groups, black life in America has always relied on collective struggle against government-sanctioned oppression and de facto injustice. Hanes Walton observes that for years Congress has operated under a biased standard against African Americans “that the individual-level of constitutional relief was better than the group-based model, even though African Americans had suffered in the American political system as a group” (54). Regarding autonomy, I agree that politically much of African American life has pivoted on the arbitrary group/individual distinction, which elites cast as an aspersion upon marginalized populations. In his discussion of liberalism and race, David Cochran remarks on an interesting dynamic within black communities. As

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5 As it concerns black politics in the late 1960s, civil rights struggles and nationalism involved a complex conditioning for African American and minority communities, which produced social transformations. However, Michael Omi and Howard Winant in *Racial Formation in the United States* have read the 1960s and 70s as “a period of racial upsurge, failed consolidation, and reaction which […] demonstrated the centrality of race in shaping American politics and culture” (5). They consider Harold Cruse’s theories of cultural nationalism, which criticized the Civil Rights movement for proffering a liberal agenda of policy demands and lacking a cultural component. Cruse favored “the development of a culturally based radical perspective” (41), and “stressed the importance of ‘cultures of resistance’ in unifying and promoting collective identity among the oppressed” (42).
he points out, “[a]utonomy depends upon a cultural context in which an individual’s internal choices make sense” (110). Cochran goes on to argue a cultural point:

Black Americans participate in a distinct cultural tradition that provides an ongoing dialogue about the content of a good life, about the nature of a good person, about worthy values and norms of behavior, about justice and human dignity, about the proper relationship of individual members to their families and communities, and so on. (110)

The degree to which blacks have made collective strides contours modernity, but the consciousness, which emerges out of resistance compels African Americans to see their participation in American democracy as substantive. I would argue that the failure to acknowledge this perspective splinters black agency—creating a situation in which blacks make some gains but have limited means of asserting their own sociopolitical autonomy within the American social fabric.

I should make clear that the status quo of the diminishment of black life in society gets particularly vexed when individuals resist it. Resisting the status quo leads to social fragmentation. But this fragmentation, I think, illuminates the precarious capacity one has for making progress in arrangements that perpetuate instability. In fact, conformity only belabors a condition of delimited influence in politics, culture, social relations, and the like. If the hope of transcendence can be jettisoned then one can seek out the transgressive spaces that exist within any constricting site. In short, an individual’s development of a more fluid consciousness might allow them to shoulder fragmentation and to progress in its midst.

Even with such daunting challenges, black communities must also consider the longstanding gender dynamics within traditional black organizations. Subsuming black
women’s autonomy within patriarchy poses a pivotal threat to African Americans’ civil rights. bell hooks addresses this issue in her concept of radical black subjectivity, which moves identity formation beyond essentialist notions of patriarchal dominance to individual process. hooks favors “identity that is not informed by a narrow cultural nationalism masking continued fascination with the power of the white hegemonic other” (20). When we move beyond essentialism to view identity as a process, black men and women become equal participants in conversations around black progress. Moreover, through hooks’s paradigm, black men can think beyond Civil Rights’ conceptions of male leadership in black communities to more nuanced ideas of equitable guidance.

African American Postmodernism and Radical Democracy

While I am concerned with the fate of history in postmodernism, I am not so much interested in periodization or temporalities as signifying the postmodern, nor do I offer readers social categories or dominants. Because postmodernism is a construct, I believe it can exist alongside other constructs like modernity, late modernity, postmarxism, countermaturity, etc. I do however take the historical circumstances behind such weighted concepts seriously. As I utilize the term “postmodernism” and its iterated theoretical and temporal connotations, my position is that I can draw from illuminating ideas that emerge from debates over the set of assumptions attached to this

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6 bell hooks discusses this concept in her chapter “The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity” in Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics.

7 While it is true that theoretical tropes and concepts generally register some sort of sociocultural complement (usually charting aesthetic, intellectual, and political epochs), Mike Feathersone has remarked that “[w]hen terminology shifts, it is possible to see this reanimating process as a strategic move in the field of academic and intellectual cultural production (Bourdieu 1984). A new generation of scholars can confine a previous one to history and make them appear outdated if they succeed in imposing a new, allegedly superior set of concepts” (148).
philosophy. In fact, I use postmodernism generally because I can look at prior crisis points in African American history that approximate something like the conjunctures and ruptures often tied to the term. I think it is more useful to think of African American postmodernism as a critical location for registering cultural practices and thoughts that enable African Americans to conceive of advancement in spite of limited agency. On account of the relation between history and postmodernism, which sees culture as a pressure point or implicates it in the paradoxical role of history in fiction (respectively Jameson and Hutcheon), I characterize the cultural realm of postmodernity as following a logic that unsettles double-binds in ways that may initially appear impractical. But this is because a postmodern agenda does not bring about the transcendence of various dilemmas but offers the wherewithal to negotiate them. Bringing about multiple transformations, this negotiation usually involves moments of reckoning in which there is a tamping down or a rethinking of one’s expectations. In this context, critics might hone in on the resolve of minority groups—a resolve that resists the allure of future challenges and confronts more immediate concerns.

As I remarked earlier, Lubiano ascribes to African American postmodernism an interest in representing certain historical realities in the present. However, even this endeavor on the part of African American critics and writers is hampered if those weighing in on the theoretical debate over postmodernism fail to “examine the relation of any Eurocentric (patriarchal, homophobic) discourse to black resistance” (West 393) and also neglect a project that “resist[s] meta- or master narratives” and “reconstructs more specific narratives” (Lubiano 160). These ideas are particularly instructive in light of discourses which hold that the fragmentation of marginalized groups predates
postmodernism (and informs its conceptions of society)⁸ and inevitably intersect with issues of democracy in the postmodern era.

While I find Lubiano’s sense of African American postmodernism illuminating, she elides a consideration of postmodernism in the context of radical democracy. Because Lubiano wants to draw attention to the contexts in which “African American text write themselves” (153), she wants to situate black postmodernism in contexts that highlight its nuanced positions. When we bring into the conversation race and radical democracy, Lubiano’s call to posit specific narratives gets elevated to a material place. This materiality counteracts postmodernism’s conflicted radical prospect, which has the effect of ghettoizing black culture (Harvey 117). I think critics do well not to ignore the way democracy has been inflected and colored by social movements.

Jean-François Lyotard’s influential text *The Postmodern Condition* remarks on the dissolution of the unitary, modern political subject as a result of avant-garde developments since the 1960s⁹, which brought forth a sociopolitical attitude more aware of difference (30). But Lyotard’s call for “wag[ing] a war on totality” (82), though it might be epitomized in African American cultural production, does not seem attentive to the black investment in reforming liberal democracy. In addition, the refrain to “activate the

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⁸ In *Yearning*, bell hooks remarks that the “overall impact of postmodernism is that many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of a sense of grounding even if it is not informed by shared circumstance” (27). Similarly, Harper investigates texts “predating the heyday of postmodernist culture and thus indicating the degree to which the subjective fragmentation of social marginality diverges from that of postmodernism, even when it apparently approximates and coincides with it” (19).

⁹ Jameson, in his Foreword to Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* suggests the 1960s as a time of emergent radical innovations and cultural formations in the West. He writes, “Postmodernism as it is generally understood involves a radical break, both with a dominant culture and aesthetic, and with a rather different moment of socioeconomic organization against which its structural novelties and innovation are measured […]” (vii).
differences” (82) seems simplistic in that those challenging repressive authority and Othered by race could scarcely facilitate an encounter with the political status quo that avoided any problematic appropriation of entrenched hegemonic ideology and initiate an egalitarian ethos.¹⁰

In an analysis of radical democracy, Chantal Mouffe has argued that such a project of political import that Lyotard imagines can only come about through connections between multiple democratic struggles for the development of new subject positions, which would articulate the many social relations we inhabit and participate in (42, 44). This political philosophy is essential in not only theories that acknowledge the presence of other voices but also in black postmodernism which speaks from a register that emphasizes intersecting oppressions.

Mainstream postmodernists also share the sense that difference necessitates new conceptions about the practice of democracy. For instance, John McGowan problematizes assumptions about the radical prospect of a politics of difference by Jameson and Lyotard for a strategy of “positive freedom,”¹¹ which looks at the social whole in order to protect difference in daily life. Undoubtedly, feminism has often championed the connection between cultural difference and politics. Black women

¹⁰ Adolph Reed, in *Stirrings in the Jug*, looks at the misdirected nature of past black political practices. Reed not only critiques civil rights leaders’ integrationist demand and their alliance with corporate liberals but also he chides nationalists for not being adamant enough about their aim of economic and political control in black communities. Because both entities “effectively reinscribed hierarchy” and insisted on a monolithic ideology, Reed attributes to them the decline of robust, black opposition to systemic injustice (65-69).

¹¹ In explaining this term, John McGowan’s *Postmodernism and Its Critics* “insist[s] that significant individual differences are possible and can be preserved only within a social whole that recognizes such differences and contains norms and institutions empowered to protect them” (15). As McGowan explains, freedom belongs to the individual and if an open future can exist, it can only do so to the extent that human diversity and creativity are given liberty.
intellectuals like Patricia Hill Collins resist the logic that academic and nonacademic labor cannot complement each other—that dissent must be cultivated within academic and political spaces and then extend outward in ready-made, accessible social projects to those outside the academy. Collaborative work among diverse black women has been a significant way to combat structures of domination wherever they appear (Black Feminist Thought 36). Postmodernism’s attention to rupture has divorced difference from democracy. For this reason, perspectives on power relations circulate largely in the discourse on postmodernity teased out by black writers. Writers have sought to articulate the systemic and routine challenges that are a part of the equation in any attempt to see one’s distance from the mainstream, one’s difference, as a catalyst to progressive struggle in American democracy.

At its core, postmodernism has elevated its theoretical conceptions of cultural phenomena above sociopolitical conditions, and when it has investigated political frameworks, it has also put undue weight on the ability of cultural production to impact political dealings and to seamlessly transform disempowerment into critical engagement. Emerging out of such historical disjunctures as rights movements, radical democracy offers a distinct vantage on the standpoints promulgated by those sidelined by race and culture. As understandings of difference intensify, so too must critical insight on radical democracy. Therefore, to my thinking African American postmodernism is uniquely situated to engage conceptions of radical democracy. For instance, I think we need to generate new frameworks that recognize the ways African Americans have consistently tempered modern liberal democracy, so that it might show greater fidelity to its egalitarian ideals.
Ontology and the Treatment of Difference in African American Fiction

Despite the scant attention given to radical democracy in postmodernist philosophy, literary postmodernism holds its own critical sway. Literary postmodernism has to do with the dynamics of textual innovation, non-linear narrative, and reflexive commentary on that act of writing itself. For the most part, it signals a critical project geared towards making observations of the essentialist categories expressed in a discursive products such as texts. According to Brian McHale, one of the most distinct qualities of postmodernist fiction is its ontological dominant. McHale’s notion of the ontological dominant suggests that the many features ascribed to this fiction can be summed up within a concept that is concerned with exploring ideas of being, with the possible world(s) that we live in and the worlds portrayed in a literary text (10). Because postmodern fiction rejects the notion of objective reality, it does not invest much in realist narrative. Similarly, writers call history into question—fictionalizing history and positing the fictionality of history itself while real-world struggles “get lost in the shuffle” (85, 96).

The foremost postmodern writers in African American literature like Ishmael Reed have demonstrated a different sort of ontological dominant, which not so much flouts historical circumstance as interrogates it. Reed’s concern with ontology involves questioning and resisting the monocultural impulses (and enterprises) in Western society. Undoubtedly because of a politics of difference in black literary postmodernism, there is deep interest in portraying cultural temporalities, rejecting mimesis, exploding notions of identity, and revising and deconstructing Euro-American centric metanarratives (Gysin 139-145). What undergirds this interest is a concern with
promulgating new and untapped epistemologies—those enabling the critical observation of social struggles and the countercultural resistances rooted in them.

Speaking about black postmodernist practices in an interview with Anders Stephanson, Cornel West remarks that the “reality one cannot not know” (277-278) creeps up in the black postmodernist practices of writers who engage American history. The implication is that the material reality of black Americans in poverty must be conceived of differently than the angst felt by middle class Americans in contemporary times. Ultimately, black postmodernists must interrogate the insights of multiple theories, but in so doing, they cannot neglect observations of social reality, which put them in touch with conditions that may not be generalizable but may index philosophical and concrete contestations.

Writing about ontological American reality, W. Lawrence Hogue argues that “white middle-class reality is seen as the unique source of meaning, as the U.S. center of gravity [...]” (13). This meaning renders African Americans passive objects of history rather than subjects often in conflict with American injustice; they are robbed of existential presence. Hogue envisions a reading of African American culture that invites historical and literary perspectives and favors the communities behind the representations (4). Exploring the perspectives of novelists, much like Bambara and Reed, whose fictional worlds portray the nuanced understandings and cosmologies of individuals no longer held in abeyance by repressive ways, might open up new critical locations. These locations tease out postmodernisms inside and outside the scope of formal complexity that are germane to culture and aesthetics.
Literary postmodernism in America is often seen as a fictional code of sorts, with its imaginative treatment of discontinuity, time, and paradigms—this code having the ability to blind readers to the differences of which it consists (Fokkema 38-40). However, black literary postmodernism must not only embrace these rhetorical innovations but also must reframe “the question of to what extent historical and social conditions restrict the options open to the writer […]” (39). Black literary postmodernism challenges dominant historical records, which are invested in erasure, and reinscribes inclusive dialogues of continuity, legacy, and opposition. When African American writers think of historical and social conditions as enhancing textual formations that blur the ideological apparatuses at work in literary production, they arrive at points of reference from which to challenge the fictional displacement of difference.

The Politics of Mid-twentieth Century Social Movements

Of the critics whose work attempts to situate black postmodernism in the world of literary and cultural theory by exploring nuanced communities that have developed around the use of language and art or by identifying the ways black culture has destabilized dominant traditions and seized public consciousness, some neglect to examine the political situations that serve as a backdrop for such occurrences. However, Hogue has foregrounded efforts to push back against the American ideological apparatus of the mid-twentieth century. He discusses the literary scene and black literatures’ ability to serve the cultural and ideological needs of African Americans. He points out the ability of sixties social movements to create extratextual discursive

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12 See Aldon Nielsen’s *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* (4-37) and Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (191-194).
formations in which black writers could not only flesh out uninvestigated African American experiences in the novel but also stretch the genre’s established conventions. Hogue makes the case that sixties movements gave way to “discourses [that] allowed new myths about, or representations of, the American and Afro-American historical past to emerge” (60).

If I extend Hogue’s sense of the defamiliarization done to established conventions, then I locate a similar defamiliarization taking place in America’s social fabric. The observation of sixties social movements represents an approach that offers critical closeness to African American politics, strivings, angst, and history in a context that makes visible moments of cultural redefinition. The novelists in this study write from the vantage of past crisis points in American history, which afford them the distance to think critically about some of the cooptations experienced in mainstream politics and to fill in the gaps of cultural insight left by those writers who abandoned freedom struggles as a fount of cultural knowledge. Bernard Bell has said about reinvigorating black cultural discourse that “[i]t would be unreasonable, however, to throw out the baby that is the relentless struggle of African Americans for freedom, justice, equality, and unity as subjects and agents of change […]” (14). I take political contestation to be central in any liberating discourse on black life and cultural production, and because of this, an examination of the liberation efforts that have spun theories into the vexed debates of the present is, I think, essential.

While beset by its own challenges, literary postmodernism is, as Hogue suggests, an apt location from which to continuously expand conventions, formal, thematic, and intertextual. This vantage allows us to consider the African American novels in this
study and the insight that emerges in them in relation to the historical content they engage. We can then think about the contexts (sites of knowledge production) imagined in the fiction written by African American men and women—contexts whose social and ideological tensions might be investigated.

Contemporary novels by African American women have engaged matters of gender, sexism, and cultural heritage with the desire to generate discussion over these issues in the public sphere. Barbara Christian has remarked that this literary endeavor clarifies “that an understanding of [black women’s] reality and imagination is essential to the process of change that the entire society must undergo in order to transform itself” (Black Feminist Criticism 185). As it concerns social transformation, black women novelists have opened new conceptual windows in the contemporary novel, which emphasize the importance of generational expressions, from the political to the everyday.

I want to make clear that the African American novel has been a site not of harmony but one surrounded by ideological and conceptual struggle. Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, aesthetic traditions have been constantly contested from external and internal forces. Gene Andrew Jarrett argues that “de facto deans presided over literary schools of racial realism […] from which certain black authors played truant by avoiding this genre (14). As a result, Jarrett’s truants, contemporary black men and women authors, have entered postmodern literary spaces. In these transgressive sites, black writers have sparked a reconsideration of tradition in black literature. When writers create nonconformist (or suspect) paradigms in their novels, they not only throw criticism into an unstable place but also they force
critics to read literary constructions in more diverse ways that do not presuppose interpretive practices based on literary tradition.

**Conclusion: African American Literary Discourse**

In the first chapter of *A Tangle of Double Binds*, I lay bare the nuances of an African American discourse that is concerned with conceptions of history in postmodernism. Analyzing African American autonomy and black social movements, I give attention to the constricting nature of African American group practices and the cooptation of black ambition in the mainstream. Still, I do not want to install a tradition. Rather, I want to look at the niche experiences in an epochal moment in American history and the rethinking of assumptions about progress that came out of it, which might teach us something about postmodern culture. The nagging notions besetting African American writers in the contemporary era are checkmated in the nexus between African American literary discourse and postmodern aims for art. Postmodern fiction militates against a politics that supports the kinds of progress beneficial to the group while ignoring the individual. Ultimately, the novelists I cover favor the prioritization of individual autonomy, for the development of a true progressive politics. In creating a discourse on postmodernity, writers imagine, in their fictive representations, their protagonists’ self-aware negotiations of society. In addition, the interrogation of fifties and sixties social movements by several writers represents an attempt to make a unique cultural vantage on postmodernity accessible.

In Chapter 2, “Revising Cultural Notions of Progress: Afropositive in Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist*,” I describe how Whitehead portrays the cooptation of black agency during the era of Racial Desegregation. His Afropositive text looks at the challenge individuals pose to industrial power brokers. Through an investigation of
Whitehead’s protagonist Lila Mae Watson, who has one foot in the elevator industry and another on the path to find James Fulton’s black box (a blueprint for elevators of the future), I observe the ways Lila Mae and her male counterparts come to rethink their notions of what progress means for African Americans as a group and individually. Lastly, Lila Mae’s revision of her ideas of progress allows her to manipulate industry brass through an intuitive strategy.

Chapter 3, “Restless Questioning: Psychological Anguish in Alice Walker’s Meridian,” looks at Walker’s exploration of the psychological angst that grips activists during the Civil Rights Movement. Looking at the ways in which Meridian Hill, the novel’s main character, learns to embrace her own ambivalence, I reveal how the divide between movement activists and political figureheads compels Meridian to seek out a deeper, more personal, politics. Moreover, I examine Truman Held’s escapism from an era of social protest to a situation in which he enjoys middle-class privilege as an artist. Meridian’s incessant questioning of the freedom struggle demonstrates a tactic, which is vital in a culture coming to grips with social apathy.

Chapter 4, “Resisting Consensus: Culture Work in John Oliver Killens’s The Cotillion: Or, One Good Bull Is Half the Herd,” analyzes Killens’s portrayal of the cultural fluorescence of late 1960s Black Nationalism. In addition, I investigate the operative class politics in the Femmes Fatales, a high-society black women’s organization, and the ways in which protagonists Yoruba Lovejoy and Ben Ali Lumumba must infuse the cultural perspectives necessary to unsettle the club’s ideology. An understanding of the class division they negotiate makes clear the need to forego consensus and invite dissent. Portraying these complexities, Killens resists the easy fix of locating common
ground upon which the black bourgeoisie, cultural nationalists, and working class blacks can meet.

Lastly, in Chapter 5, “Multiple Truths: Journeys and Prospects in Toni Morrison’s Tar Baby,” I examine Morrison’s circulation of multiple truths in order to highlight the legitimate capital ascribed to different truths across communities in the post-Civil Rights era. I consider the ways in which Jadine Childs and Son (William Green) get entangled on their journeys toward self-discovery. Critiquing Jadine’s connection to her wealthy benefactors and to her aunt and uncle, this chapter observes her struggle to adopt a consciousness that embraces her own notion of truth. Son, however, cannot do the same, making it difficult for him to see beyond the false stability of a previous life.

This project represents my attempt to analyze the discourses on postmodernity circulating within contemporary African American letters. In doing so, I have discussed African American fiction that deploys resistance to both cultural and societal constraints. The novels I examine in this study, produced from the early 1970s to the late 1990s, diligently explore cultural perspectives. Thematizing the effect of particular historical moments on black populations, they present views that can be read in relation to their own disillusionment with group consensus and an always-already compromised inclusion into mainstream society. Pointing out the common effacement of the tenor of black American experience in postmodernism, hooks calls for an anti-essentialism that recognizes “the way black identity has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle” (hooks 29). If African American writers and critics take hooks’s call to heart then they must introduce translatable examples of black autonomy that have been calibrated, in a context of social fervor, to resist specific oppressions. Bringing, as
it does, such autonomous experiences to the forefront of literary and cultural studies, my research signals an expansion in the lexicon around postmodern black cultural politics.
CHAPTER 2
REVISING CULTURAL CONCEPTIONS OF PROGRESS: AFROFURISM IN COLSON WHITEHEAD’S THE INTUITIONIST

Gene Andrew Jarrett’s *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature* interrogates the tradition of social change in African American literary history. Jarrett makes the case that deans—proponents of racial realism who believe black writers should exclusively address the inequities of black life—view contemporary writers that do not primarily emphasize race as truant. Regarding the contemporary shift in aesthetic tradition, Jarrett argues that author’s efforts “to imagine a complex world that allows [them] to interrogate racial hierarchy and celebrate inclusive Americanism, yet remain attentive to the history of race and racism in the United States, implies a more sophisticated way of thinking about the connection of racial history to the canons or traditions of African American literature” (186). Jarrett’s argument makes reference to postmodernist work, which has its broadest implications in Afroturism.¹ Burgeoning as it is in the postmodern era, this genre engages issues of race through a contemporary lens that picks apart the propagandistic realism of its literary predecessors. Sandra Jackson and Julie E. Moody-Freeman in *The Black Imagination* describe Afroturism as “consider[ing] issues of time, technology, culture and race, focusing on Black speculations about the future, foregrounding Black agency and creativity explored through literature, film, art and music” (3). In this way, Afroturism approaches the heterogeneous conditions of postmodern society by drawing from a cache of varied tropes.

¹ Sandra Jackson and Julie E. Moody-Freeman in *The Black Imagination* define Afroturism as “a literary and cultural aesthetic which encompasses historical fiction, fantasy and myth, magical realism and draws upon non-Western cosmologies to interrogate and critique current conditions of Black and other people of color to examine the past and envision different futures” (3).
In chapter one, I consider the impetus in Afrofuturist fiction to lay bare the co-optation of individual ambition by mainstream institutions. Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* (1999) portrays American modernization through technology and the dealings of industrial power brokers. Whitehead critiques ambitious individuals who, in their drive for success, do not recognize elite corruption, and he offers worker agency as a solution to the alienation experienced by African Americans in postmodernity. Ultimately, Whitehead demonstrates the marginalization of black workers—capturing the spheres in which black workers find themselves.

**Situating Colson Whitehead’s Representation**

Whitehead’s novels make a number of aesthetic moves, and they cross genres. In African American literary criticism, critics describe Whitehead’s work as “explicating racial authenticity, cultural memory, and cross-cultural interpenetration” (Michael New 242). For Bernard Bell, Whitehead and his contemporaries “experiment with the conventions of legend, tale, and fable” (82). My research further identifies a set of postmodernist understandings of Whitehead’s work, as in Brian Norman’s *Neo-Segregation Narratives*, Madhu Dubey’s *Signs and Cities* and Fritz Gysin’s description in *From Modernism to Postmodernism* of Whitehead’s aesthetic as “a postmodern brand of historiographic metafiction” (149). Thus, contemporary black literature has a fluid quality that lands it in the critical sights of multiple disciplines.

With the publication of *The Intuitionist*, Whitehead entered the broad genre of science fiction. He has been able to apply racial concerns to issues of technology, politics, industry, etc., in diverse ways where each issue informs the other. Critics like Isiah Lavender, Frankie Bailey, Steven Belleto, and Suman Gupta look at the intersection of cultural politics in science fiction, mystery and investigation, war politics,
and globalization respectively. These elements show up in Whitehead’s fiction in allegories of race. ²

Whitehead’s second and third novel John Henry Days and The Colossus of New York suggest that one of his foremost concerns was recasting the past. William Ramsey in “An End of Southern History” writes that Whitehead’s southern setting in John Henry Days “undermines the whole project of traditional historical explanation” and operates with remarkable freedom from the burden of the past” (780). Similarly, in her essay “City Memory, City History,” Tamar Katz remarks that The Colossus, though set in an urban environment, “generates a perpetually vanishing past and unlike The Intuitionist doesn’t imagine a city in any substantial way organized around racial lines or by divisions in politics, class, or ethnicity” (811, 822). With Katz’s claims in mind, I focus on Colson Whitehead’s The Intuitionist because it not only portrays an identifiable historical moment (racial integration) but also does not shy away from a confrontation with the past and present burden of long-held cultural narratives.

I investigate workplace integration and Whitehead’s concern with the navigation of urban industry by African Americans. In addition, he examines the way social progress gets defined in black communities and explores the benefits this kind of examination holds in understanding the hindrances to individual direction. I argue that The Intuitionist seeks to revise cultural conceptions of progress. In doing so, the novel

² For instance, see Isiah Lavender’s Race in American Science Fiction, in which he suggests that Whitehead’s ethnoscapes examine race and physical structure (165); Frankie Bailey’s African American Mystery Writers looks at the ways Whitehead roots his geographical spaces in historically black conceptions of morality and social identity (108); Steven Belloto’s No Accident, Comrade: Chance and Design in Cold War American Narratives pegs The Intuitionist as an allegory of the relationship between individuals, state authority, and society (33, 80); and Suman Gupta’s Globalization and Literature highlights the author’s cosmopolitan descriptions of American immigration and diverse ethnic groups (40-41).
effects a postmodern revision in which ambitious individuals rethink their relationship to society and demonstrate strategic negotiations of work and social space.

**Afrofuturism’s Industrial Inroads**

Jeffrey Allen Tucker’s essay “African American Science Fiction” looks at some of the foundational voices in the genre since the late 1960s and urges on the expansion of black writers and black readerships. Indeed, the fiction of artists like Toni Cade Bambara, Ishmael Reed, Gloria Naylor, and Colson Whitehead represents a particular Afrofuturist leaning in African American literature, which thematizes the strong influence of individuals in the industrial sector. The aesthetic penned by these writers operates in several ways—in terms of exploding notions of a singular kind of blackness; transforming the way readers see society; featuring (technological) futurist elements or mechanized unsustainable practices; and illustrating the discursive quality of literature. Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* features a local chemical plant that threatens the health of a small town population and the ability of black political organizations to make any headway. In like manner, Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* heralds the coming of a futuristic elevator with heretofore unseen malleability. At the same time, the elevator industry itself overruns with competing entities and special interests that attempt to manipulate the novel’s protagonists. Interest in these kinds of sociopolitical themes that revolve around new opportunities for African Americans has grown. Afrofuturist fiction shares similar tropes with American popular science fiction. While the placing of marginalized cultures at the forefront signals a major distinction, both bodies of work conceive of individual influence as a composite of tradition or tenets that are at risk of co-optation by larger society.
Afrofuturism signals a separation in black literary studies among the protest literature traditions and discourses that imagine race in nuanced contexts. Earlier traditions of slave narratives, protest literature, and even nationalism have utilized the literary platform to defend black humanity and demand fidelity to racial equality in America. Throughout the twentieth century these trends expressed vernacular-based idioms that propelled African American cultural production into mainstream American letters. Nonetheless, the postmodern era ushers in concerns about “20th century technoculture” and race as well. When assumptions about race relations and a post-racial America dominate the public sphere, writers delve into the fundamental assumptions that drive such memes. Unwilling to confine itself to the proscriptions of affirming and defending cultural identity against detractors, Afrofuturism expresses curiosity in imagining fantastic and technological components in society while remaining “attentive to the history of race and racism in the United States.” Because Afrofuturist fiction concerns itself with racial history, its portrayals of futuristic or post-apocalyptic environs offer insight into technological advancement and social crises. By investigating an insidious racial order, black writers opt for a more comprehensive approach to understanding the motivating force behind the will to advance and the snares that await such ambition in postmodern society. However, this kind of fictional project—evaluating a set of cultural assumptions—can only be useful if it can find ways not only to “interrogate racial hierarchy” but also to maneuver through it. Ultimately, contemporary fiction, while it may not engage race in the explicit group portrayals of

3 In his essay “Black to the Future,” Mark Dery describes situates the term in an African American context that observes technology and imagines an enhanced future” (Flame Wars 180).
earlier literary movements, it does supply a useful take on the weight these same movements have inadvertently placed on the contemporary racial individual.

Since the 1970s, grassroots possibility in American science fiction has functioned as a liberal philosophy opposite the state and corrupt political processes. Ken Macleod posits that “Much, though as we shall see not all, of the most popular and enduring sf is firmly within the Western liberal current […]” (231). In particular, for Macleod, science fiction views individual autonomy as a means of escaping the mainstream political realm, and stresses “technological self-sufficiency” (237). Writing about culture and similar thematic identifiers in the Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction, Elisabeth Leonard argues that science fiction can solidify itself as a potent literature when it gives attention to issues of race, using “imaginative possibilities” to create worlds that solve “existing social problems” (253). Moreover, the use of ordinary people, as a concept in fiction, must be infused with nuanced alternatives that reimagine routes to self-sufficiency apart from the political status quo.

While science fiction can create worlds in which people solve problems outside the realm of government influence, during the sixties and seventies the nation underwent a rights revolution that called on the government to intervene in the protection of minority civil rights. As John Skrentny remarks, “After the mass mobilization and watershed events of the black civil rights movement, this later revolution was led by the Establishment” (The Minority Rights Revolution 2). In the 1970s, America saw an increase in the number of African Americans\(^4\) participating in government and in

\(^4\) See The Politics of Race: African Americans and the Political System.
protests, as well. In addition, Congress introduced a number of civil rights measures that enabled more effective advocacy of civil rights at the federal level.

Undoubtedly, federal legislation played a key role in hastening the trek toward the realization of African American equal rights and access to more employment, but resistance in the business sector checkered these gains. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe analyze racial bias in the post-Civil Rights era within industrial business. In “Hegemony and Radical Democracy,” they argue that one can comprehend hegemonic articulations of race, class, and gender “on the basis of separate struggles” and “overdetermining effects in certain spheres of the social” (178). The emphasis on certain spheres might refer to the socioeconomic conditions exacerbated by modern urbanization. In Postmodernism and Its Critics, John McGowan argues that “the individual is a functionary of power” and that the desires emanating from the seats of power cannot be conceived apart from “human agents” (254). Whitehead concerns himself with the sphere of recently integrated black labor, with those that pursue opportunity in hegemonic structures. The Intuitionist invites an observation of individual impact in the midst of obstruction. Tellingly, Whitehead discards the alternative of lowering one’s ambition. Instead, he calls for a postmodern redirecting of worker energy toward infusing the structures of power with not only racial difference but also the perspectives of marginalized groups.

The struggle black Americans have faced after their embattled entrance into mainstream society speaks to the ways in which Afrofuturism’s discourse takes to task the misconception that opportunities in industry would necessarily lead to equitable living in the postmodern era. Charles Banner-Haley’s The Fruits of Integration looks at
the way black culture, decades after integration, remains weighted with the “ongoing struggle of African Americans to define themselves and their attendant vision of what America is and is becoming, a struggle that has often fallen to the black middle class to mediate” (xxi). Expanding Banner-Haley’s ideas, I argue that the durability of any new vision of social possibility for black Americans depends upon the willingness of the individual to identify accomplishment as agency within American institutions.

The attempt to qualify the influential sway of the individual in black literary criticism speaks to Ken Macleod’s notions of American science fiction as a literature that creates possibility, which includes political ideas that depart from Western perspectives. For instance, W. Laurence Hogue’s *The African American Male, Writing and Difference* looks at the emergence of studies of tradition that have been excluded from the pre-1960s racial uplift narratives and the 1970s/1980s Black aesthetic canons. Hogue suggests, “What is emerging is a polycentric reading of African American literature, allowing us to talk about differences within that literature” (50). If this shift allows for a more comprehensive representation of black American life, then considering the tensions blacks encounter in everyday cultural exchange in society can serve as a point of departure. As it concerns Hogue’s investigation, the more equitable the canon becomes in it representations, the more critical attention leans toward the cognitive shifts African Americans must make to negotiate mainstream institutions and in-group encounters.

In tune with the imaginative political possibilities of science fiction and the advancement of American minorities, sixties social movements and black material reality become key in understanding postmodern conditions. Colson Whitehead states
in an interview with Linda Selzer that “Every advancement has its benefits and its price. My outlook on the world prohibits me from cheerleading the latest thing—I always have to find the weakness. The hidden cost. So—the Intuitionists, despite their philosophy, have to be a bit corrupt as a group because they are human beings” (396). Because Whitehead’s innate skepticism drives him, he does not take even the appearance of effective influence in his novels at face value. He acknowledges that as a result of integration, a culture of pride developed that elided some of the critical thought, which would aggravate, though necessarily so, thoughts about the gains of that era. As Whitehead suggests in the interview, at the crux of *The Intuitionist* lies his suspicion of the depth of the veiled costs involved on both sides of the cultural and political equation and their manifestations in the postmodern era.

The celebrated authorship of men and women novelists and critics demonstrates strides toward balanced gender dynamics in Afrofuturism and postmodern fiction. Octavia Butler and Samuel Delaney, two of the foremost Afrofuturists, come to mind alongside Nalo Hopkinson, Walter Mosely, and Tananarive Due, to name a few. Delaney has remarked that “[b]ecause we’re going through a period of social solidarity among women, and black women especially, there’s been a much needed surge of improvement in the visibility of black women writers, that’s even reached into the science fiction precincts” (96). In addition, critics like Mark Dery and Alondra Nelson also provide a new stream of insight on technoculture. The critical value of Afrofuturism comes through appropriating the savviness of information society and convening a conversation, for the most part, around the agency for blacks working in urban institutions.
Postmodernity and Identity Formation

Lila Mae Watson becomes the first black woman elevator inspector in an unnamed metropolis reminiscent of mid-twentieth century New York City. A devout Intuitionist, she touts an accuracy rating of 100%. However, a disdain for Lila Mae’s expertise embroils her in a controversy that not only spirals out of control in close encounters with Mafia cronies but also leads her into self-awareness. Having previously submitted an inspection report, the Department of Elevator Inspectors blames her for the inexplicable crash of the Number Eleven elevator at the Fanny Briggs Memorial Building. To worsen matters, the drama thickens around the Elevator Guild’s election year. Two candidates vie for Guild Chair, the current president Frank Chancre (Empiricist) and hopeful Oliver Lever (Intuitionist). Intuitionists worry this incident will discredit their camp and hurt their candidate’s chances, making Lila Mae a target. Lacking solidarity with anyone, Lila Mae seeks out Pompey, the only other black employee, who rejects her cordial entreaties because of his bitterness. The diminishing viability of Lila Mae’s career forces her to reckon with her ideas about progress. Ultimately, the entire industry is searching for a missing manuscript known as the black box, which the industry believes contains a blueprint for technologically unparalleled elevators of the future). James Fulton, an African American elevator theorist, is believed to have created this black box during his in-depth study of elevation.

Whitehead sets the stage for the postmodern era in *The Intuitionist* through the socioeconomic ramifications of industrialization and urbanization that developed during the period of racial integration. Whitehead creates a discourse around the crisis of progress in the novel. The power structures in place compel strategies of workplace navigation. Moreover, the novel exposes the inextricable links between spheres of
black labor and unchecked political power. For example, the characters Lila Mae, Pompey, James Fulton, and Raymond Coombs all find themselves beset by dilemmas in which they must leverage their agency in the elevator industry. The key in overcoming problematic worker conditions rests in revising the ways one thinks about progress (after integration) in favor of a more self-aware notion of progress.

Just as *The Intuitionist* depicts modernization, inclusive of government, business monopolies, and blue collar workers, Whitehead also showcases the contributions to modernization by those rendered invisible through exclusion and racial othering. In assessing black perspectives, Whitehead works through the sociopolitical spheres sustained by African American workers. Insofar as he unveils the co-conspiratorial partnership between the public and private sector, Whitehead addresses the spaces in which the functionaries of power can re-appropriate the tools of the elite. Finally, Whitehead invests in a project that frames a corrective to hegemonic domination.\(^5\)

Recently, critics like Madhu Dubey give attention to *The Intuitionist*’s interrogation of urban modernity. Dubey, for example, argues that “Whitehead’s novel undertakes a critical excavation, revealing African-Americans to be the hidden architects of modern cities” (238). Because Whitehead engages in a “project of corrective reading,” Dubey states, he “revises the emancipatory narratives of print literacy and urban migration that propelled African-American literature for over a century.” The protagonist Lila Mae, Dubey argues, follows a path of social mobility by becoming literate and later

\(^5\) Antonio Gramsci’s “Hegemony” fleshes out his concept of social power with the notion of hegemony. Gramsci is concerned with how and why the elite maintain power over the dominated without force. For Gramsci, while the consent of the dominated comes through socialization and education, he finds consent bound up in the relationship between intellectuals and the world of production. Gramsci understands the “intellectual [and cultural] strata and their degree of connection with a fundamental social group, and to establish a gradation of their functions and of the superstructures from the bottom to the top” (673).
questioning modernity’s pretensions of equality, and self-discovery. On a fundamental level, Intuitionism—the brain-child of James Fulton, who writes a book that initiates Intuitionist philosophy (while passing for white)—awakens Lila Mae. Fulton’s philosophy “makes perfect sense to Lila Mae once she understands the complicity between racism and modern reason” (239). As Dubey remarks, “Whitehead implies that the book, the modern print tradition, will have to be refashioned before it can redeem its utopian promise” (241). Finally, Dubey sees the trope of the-book-within-a-book in novels as signaling a concomitant change in the use of print literacy in contemporary times.

In a different vein, John Johnston argues that Whitehead’s project portrays Lila Mae as inserting herself into a coming sociopolitical order. For Johnston, The Intuitionist mostly “consists of Lila Mae’s efforts to avoid or move between the treacherous intrigues and manipulations of her boss (vying for re-election) and his Mafia supporters on one side, and the false haven of Intuitionist House on the other” (“Pattern Recognition” 863). Unlike Dubey, Johnston stresses the idea that amid the political and physical danger, Lila Mae not only seeks out Fulton’s theoretical work but also Fulton himself. He argues that at the novel’s end, Lila Mae “assumes the role of the “keeper,” assimilating Fulton’s voice” (864). While these essays identify important critical subtexts in The Intuitionist, neither author delves specifically into concerns the functionary role of black workers in a crooked enterprise.

Throughout her brief career, Lila Mae engages in a project of self-awareness. Hailing from a tradition of resilient black women, namely Harriet Beechum, a prominent black actress; Fanny Briggs, an enslaved African who teaches herself to read, and her vigilant third grade teacher, Ms. Parker, Lila Mae builds upon a foundation of strength,
curiosity, and, at times, riskiness, which stems from her affinity for the unsettling darkness (or void) of elevators. In *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, Gerhard Hoffmann says of the void that the “ineffable takes the form of a mystery, a ‘paradoxical verity’” (630). Lila Mae sees the city’s changes as mirroring her own development. Her formative years and her present both inhabit the void that enthralls her. Her politics epitomize her favorite line from Fulton’s theoretical work: “There is another world beyond this one” (63). Whitehead’s understanding of this other world says less about futurity than about the viability of a transcendent life path.

Bernard Bell’s *The Contemporary African American Novel* takes up the task of assessing the new voices, politics, and poetics emerging in the tradition of the African American novel. Bell argues that his revised vernacular approach “privileges a cyclical rather than an ascending dialectic for understanding history and developing consciousness […]” (12). One feature that Afrofuturism equips is Bell’s acknowledgement of the spiral from the progressive to the apocalyptic that contemporary novelists emphasize in relation to African American reality.

Afrofuturism goes deeper in this direction that most contemporary discourses in postmodern culture. In spite of its often oblique references to race and cultural difference, Afrofuturism interrogates the regressive tendencies in African American culture and politics. Highlighting the blind spots in narratives of uplift and pointing out the disconnect between black access to opportunity and mainstream sectors and the

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6 The notion of a future city that “will possess untold arms and a thousand eyes, mutability itself, constructed of as-yet unconjured plastics. It will float, fly, fall, have not need of steel armature, have a liquid spine, no spine at all (198) in *The Intuitionist* instantiates an example of the ontological play Brian McHale associates with postmodernist fiction. For McHale, the ontological dominant governs this fiction wherein it draws from the fantastic and implications of encounters between different worlds.
fragmentation of black agency in those spaces, Whitehead’s metropolis opens up a number of critical dialogues with it readers. Conversations about the inheritance of 1950s racial integration as well as shifts in the canon of African American literature are being spurred on as an exigency in the postmodern condition. This setting makes encounters with the mainstream in *The Intuitionist* unavoidable and facilitates characters’ abilities to see their respective cultural traditions refracted off themselves.

**Whitehead’s Integration Metropolis**

In *The Intuitionist*, Whitehead contextualizes workplace integration as a political phenomenon, helmed by leaders and interest groups within the elevator industry. However, in the African American community, integration registers as racial progress and black access to American capitalist entities. After being called back to Headquarters to discuss the elevator incident, as yet unbeknownst to her, Lila Mae fixates on a billboard elevator ad that, for her, gets seen in the eyes of ordinary civilians as a “dim affirmation of modernity, happy progress to be taken for granted and subconsciously cherished.” This passage serves as a clear description of the environment Whitehead creates, which portrays society in the early stages of integration and socioeconomic inclusion. The presence of African Americans in positions previously held by whites strikes a chord in mainstream America. Moreover, the bureaucratic and political ploys of the elevator industry eclipse the significance of this social milestone.

The move toward the inclusion of African Americans inheres in an expansive phrase in the novel, “summoning them into tumultuous modernity” (158). Whitehead writes this line in describing the effect of the elevator upon the American city. However, when read in relation to the novel’s integration backdrop, the phrase stresses the extent
to which a contrived sense of accomplishment (elevation) glosses over the failings of modernization. Because Lila Mae’s ideas of success prove consistent with group narratives of uplift, I contextualize the history of the northern city and black subjectivity. Writing about twentieth-century migration out of the agrarian south in “Who Set You Flowin’?": The African-American Migration Narrative, Farah Jasmine Griffin talks about the creation of a new self in the North because “for many, the sites of the ancestor are stifling and provincial and as such they inhibit the progress and the development of the protagonist” (8). In The City in African American Literature, Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert Butler remark that much twentieth century black literature, though “never hesitant to criticize the negative aspects of American city life, it has only rarely suggested that pastoral alternatives to the city exist for black people” (10). Stressing the unique development of “black urban consciousness” in the city, Hakutani and Butler include Amiri Baraka’s essay “Black Literature in the Afro-American Nation,” which argues that “if the cities represent higher levels of perception and sophistication for us in America, they must be the focal point of yet more advanced levels of struggle” (10-11).

To a considerable degree, the practice of integration sets off a number of disruptions. Whitehead creates controversy around two ideological groups, the Empiricists and Intuitionists, not for the sake of the privileging of one over another but instead to have readers question their respective underpinnings. Whitehead sets Empiricism and Intuitionism at odds, showing how the former allies with Western modernity and the latter with postmodern difference. Empiricists vilify Intuitionist inspectors, calling them witch doctors. Intuitionists decry Empiricists as over-reliant on

7 qtd. in Hakutani and Butler’s The City in African American Literature.
sight. For instance, in a press conference following the Fanny Briggs’ crash, Chancre poses the rhetorical question: “Why hold truck with the uppity and newfangled when Empiricism has always been the steering light of reason? Just like it was in our fathers’ day, and our fathers’ fathers.’ Today’s incident is just the kind of unfortunate mishap that can happen when you kowtow to the latest fashions from overseas” (27). Chancre historicizes Empiricism but others Intuitionism as a non-Western framework. Later in the novel, Lila Mae offers a critique of Empiricism: “They [elevator companies] have already bought off many of the street men—building owners lay cash on inspectors in exchange for fastidious blindness to defect. Their sacred Empiricism has no meaning when it can be bought” (240). Nonetheless, for Whitehead, privileging either framework ignores the unsavory relationship between those that make the products and those that service them. The presence of African Americans in the industry only expands the base for power brokers intent on using inspectors for their foul purposes.

Empiricism in the novel has to do with logic and reason. When an inspector subscribing to this philosophy services an elevator, he or she does so literally by-the-book and also based upon prior experience. However, as the name suggests, Intuitionist inspectors utilize their intuition when servicing elevators, which includes sensory experience. For example, Lila Mae literally “leans against the dorsal wall of the elevator and listens” as the “elevator’s vibrations are resolving themselves in her mind […]” (5-6). In the novel, Intuitionism comes about as a revision of what Whitehead sees as an always already compromised empirical “light of reason,” which Chancre extols in his speech.
Whitehead draws attention to the othering of Intuitionism—through its most prominent practitioner, Lila Mae. The logic behind scapegoating her for the Fanny Briggs elevator crash stems from what Lila Mae’s only Department friend Chuck describes as “Innovation and regression,” which he explains as conservative backlash from executives over the entrance of numerous women and minorities into the Elevator Guild (the inspector association that oversees the Department). During a press conference, the Mayor and the Guild chair launch a full investigation, yet they sidestep any accusations of foul play, eclipsing all racial animus tethered to Lila Mae by claiming a neutral focus “on the facts at hand, such as the inspection records” (23). Slipping undetected into O’Connor’s (a bar frequented by elevator inspectors), Lila Mae comprehends that “she’s a lost tourist among heavy vowels, the crude maps of ancestral homelands, and the family crests of near-exterminated clans. Her position is precarious everywhere she goes in this city, for that matter, but she’s trained to keep invisible in its ubiquity […]” (23). A comment supporting that reality comes from the bar: “Everything known is now different” (24). The language here, which speaks to what Cornel West calls homogeneous communalism, brings Chuck’s ruminations full circle. The onslaught of difference not only challenges the prescribed authority but also represents a moment of opportunism for those leaders and agents touting diversity while simultaneously stoking the fears of racial difference.

8 In Cornel West’s 1990 essay “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” such a politics hinges upon the demystification of institutional power structures. West calls for a move from “homogeneous communalism” (28). In the late twentieth century, there is a sense that people must challenge the status quo, least our current dilemmas escalate. In that respect, the new cultural politics of difference faces sociopolitical challenges that are specifically at odds with the concentrated power we see portrayed in The Intuitionist with the elevator industry.
Whitehead writes a passage that encapsulates the conundrum undergirding black inclusion: "Habits clamp down on the ankle and resist all entreaties, no matter how logical. As it is in politics, the only victor in the end was ugly compromise" (16). Swept up in a web of lies, backroom deals, and political corruption, Lila Mae must confront her existential crises as an embroiled inspector. Whitehead interrogates the subtle compromises found in Lila Mae's occupation, cultural consciousness, and ambitious pursuits. He does this by inserting characters at odds with Lila Mae's token success as the first black female elevator inspector. For, instance, when Lila Mae heads home to contemplate the Fanny Briggs elevator crash, she finds Jim and John, two industry cronies, rambling through her apartment for Fulton's missing papers.

Whitehead muses on racial integration through Jim's and John's observations, which demonstrate an anxiety about the city's changing racial landscape. In one of The Intuitionist's most useful commentaries, John reveals his view of the circularity of life while in Lila Mae's home. He muses that "there must be patterns, experience is recursive, and if the pattern has not announced itself yet, it will, eloquent and emphatic in a mild-mannered sort of way" (28). To square this moment with others throughout his life, John needs a new perspective that the lens through which he has heretofore viewed life has not given him. Jim and John represent the white mythical norm despite their criminality involvement, a norm being winnowed away in the racial sea change John philosophizes about.

As they methodically search Lila Mae's apartment, they busy themselves with an appraisal of her drab clothing and identical suits. In discovering her sense of regularity, Jim and John confront their existential status as average individuals, "invisible
everymen, the true citizens. Lila Mae counts few people in this world as friends. Jim and John are the rest. Dusty brown clumps of hair, prow jaws, complexions quick to blood” (29). Whitehead inscribes into John’s philosophical position an awareness of the crises in American industry and the way in which its veneer unravels, belying the deception that the rugged individualism of the racial majority alone ushered in modernity. In one instance, John peers through a window out over Lila Mae’s neighborhood. From this vantage, Whitehead posits a fluid understanding of the tensions between speculators and migrant communities that have shaped Lila Mae’s neighborhood. Acknowledging the influx of African Americans during the Great Migration and the flight of Polish and Russian immigrants (that still maintained their stores in the neighborhood), Whitehead exposes the hand of speculators in shaping the meaning of the neighborhood for each group:

The neighborhood is changing again. Its meaning blurs at the edges as white people return, obeying the city’s rules of teeming density and insidious rents. Only the real estate agents, who understand that meaning is elastic, know the borders of the neighborhood for sure, modulating their sales pitches to reassure their clients that they are not moving into the colored neighborhood, but into the farther reaches of the adjacent white neighborhood. (30)

In articulating a speculator’s skill at shaping the meaning of a community to outsiders, the text lays bare an understanding of minority conditions, which speaks to the wider implications of integration. This observation posits an understanding of inclusion that looks at its complications. Lila Mae’s crisis illustrates well the mixed bag of her ascension in the industrial arena.

In *The Intuitionist*, just as Lila Mae receives the symbolic benefits of being an elevator inspector, she also inherits the thorny industry practices that go along with it.

Not long after Mafia thugs burglarize Lila Mae’s apartment, Mr. Reed, Lever’s campaign
manager, arrives at her home and tells her she has been set up because of the controversy surrounding Fulton’s black box. Reed ponders Chancre’s motives for a preemptive strike, for involving someone on the outer circle away from high profile orchestrations. Ironically, just before Reed arrives, a shocked Lila Mae reflects on her diminishment in the face of such political fallout. She thinks about her small living quarters: “She thinks of her room at the Bertram Arms. It’s a miracle she lives there, how accustomed she is to this small world. ‘How small her expectations are.’” In addition, her smallness comes to reference the ways those in power exploit her.

When Reed speaks of Lila Mae’s value to the Intuitionist camp, he paints her in a contradictory light, as fall-girl, token, and asset. To his logic, and although he ties her employment to the Intuitionist’s despised liberal policies, it does not follow that the Department implicates Lila Mae in the elevator crash because of her race, gender, or perfect inspection record. His subsequent statement however calls attention to his disingenuousness: “‘You’d be surprised how many people have taken an interest in your career, Miss Lila Mae. The first colored woman to become an elevator inspector. That’s quite an accomplishment. We’re glad to have you in our camp. […] We take care of our own” (64). Although Reed promises absolution for Lila Mae once he sorts things out, Whitehead draws our attention to Lila Mae’s own shift and the expansion of her “small expectations” when she tells Reed she will find the black box.

For Lila Mae, the security of her position soon becomes secondary, at which point she adopts a more fluid agenda. However, before Lila Mae can influence power and act as the custodian of her own narrative, independent of a presumed progress, Whitehead tasks her with negotiating two discourses: her unyielding detective work to locate
Fulton’s missing papers and her intellectual development as an Intuitionist critical thinker. First, she must repel the antics of industry cronies. From there, she must shed her own tough exterior and finally appropriate Fulton’s “luminous truth” (230).

**Asserting Gender**

In *The Intuitionist*, Whitehead ties issues of gender to tense situations in which women demonstrate assertiveness in the face of either male dominance or reserve in the novel. Lila Mae’s conversations with Mr. Reed bring issues of gender to the fore. While Lila Mae’s present skepticism “involves taking assistance from this man Reed—and it is the acceptance, and not the aid itself, which galls her and makes her pride curdle” (56). Reed’s condescension juts up against the pride Lila Mae takes in striking her own path—a pride she fights to maintain when declaring she will locate the missing pages of Fulton’s notebooks. In addition, the experiences to which she flashes back about her abrasive father Marvin Watson tell readers of their strained relationship, particularly as it concerns her education. She recalls a childhood incident when she gets out of bed for a drink of water. Thinking her parents were asleep, she encounters her father drinking whiskey and reading about elevators. He calls her over and asks, “‘They teaching you how to read, girl?’” (119). Lila Mae nods, but when she begins reading, she cannot identify most of the words. Her father reads every word, warns that she listen to her teacher, and bellows “‘What’d you come down here for?’ he asked her, talking loud now, not like when he was reading and he whispered. ‘A glass of water.’ ‘Then get it and get your ass in bed,’ he told her. While her father takes an interest in her literacy, this incident, the contrast between gentle father and scathing patriarch have the effect of making Lila Mae reticent in matters of education. When Lila Mae applies to
the Institute of Vertical Technology, she does not tell her mother or father. Notwithstanding, she experiences guilt over leaving her parents and moving North.

The reticence she maintains as a child and adolescent unravels as she matures. While a teenager, Lila Mae goes on a movie date with her childhood friend, Grady Jr., who will attend a northern college in the fall. Grady’s demure behavior stifles her last opportunity for affection with him; he gently kisses her and then pulls away after spying her father in the window of her home. Lila Mae “wasn’t mad at all, she wanted him to kiss her more. But Lila Mae didn’t say that” (132). This marks the final instance of her reserved behavior. After moving North, she has a one night stand with Freeport Jackson, a traveling beauty products salesman, which she approaches with a methodical, bureaucratic assertiveness. Her earlier reticence morphs into a disregard for trivial words and a command of the situation: “He said stuff but she ignored it because it did not pertain to the case” (180). Lila Mae only “recorded the details of the investigation, his fingers and kisses, his slow tumble on top of her [...].” Lila Mae adopts persistence\(^9\) as a necessary characteristic. In the face of patriarchal dominance and insecurity, this trait prepares her for a male-dominated career in elevators.

Another woman character in the novel, Marie Claire Rogers faces her own gender issues, with which Lila Mae becomes acquainted. As James Fulton’s resident housekeeper (he has been deceased for six years), Mrs. Rogers has literally borne the burden of Fulton’s endeavors. She survives intimidation and multiple break-ins. She

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\(9\) Patricia Hill Collins, in thinking through black women’s historic and contemporary strivings for self-definition. In *Black Feminist Thought*, she writes “Black women’s persistence is fostered by the strong belief that to be Black and female is worthy of respect” (120). Whitehead has Lila Mae’s own social development reflect this historical truth. Her nurturing comes from the influence of strong black women like Fanny Briggs, a brave enslaved African in the novel who teaches herself to read and is named for a municipal building in the city.
even becomes subject to rumors by Lila Mae’s own speculation: “It is Mrs. Rogers’s house now, by contractual agreement. There was no mention of it in the file, but there must be rumors that Fulton and Rogers were lovers. Why else go to so much trouble for a servant. Did she start redecorating when he was alive, by creeping degrees” (89)? We learn that Mrs. Rogers moves in because Fulton could not tolerate any other housekeepers. Yet Mrs. Rogers demonstrates her own assertiveness when someone from the industry asks that she keep them informed about Fulton’s activities: “Like I was going to be a spy in my own house, because that’s what this place became as soon as I moved in here. My house. I told them to get the hell out of my kitchen […]” (91). When Lila Mae asks why she accepted Fulton’s offer to move in, Rogers responds “What am I going to do,’ […] ‘stay in that city with all that foolishness that goes on these days? There ain’t much to do out here, but you don’t have to think about some kid knocking you over the head for your money” (90). She speaks to the desperate situation created by the nefarious practices of the elevator industry, which limits opportunity in urban areas. The lack of opportunity materializes in downtrodden urban communities. Rogers uses the agency she possesses as a domestic worker in negotiating her living conditions and escaping the conditions exacerbated by modernization.

**Tokenism and Negro Firsters**

The novel makes distinct comments on the issue of integration when it comes to male characters. Tokenism and the notion of Negro firsters have their own complexities in the space of black male leadership. Lila Mae confronts Pompey about the Fanny Brigg’s elevator incident. While Pompey absolves himself of any role in Lila Mae’s targeting, Whitehead suggests that he despises Lila Mae for possessing some of the
same conformist values as he did when he became an elevator inspector. An office rumor circulates about Pompey that indicts blacks as obsequious opportunists groveling for promotions. Holt, the former Guild Chair, summons Pompey upstairs for a conference:

He [Pompey] expected confidences; Holt told him he was going to kick him in the ass. Pompey laughed (this executive humor was going to take a little getting used to) and went along to the joke, even after Holt told him to bend over. Which he did. Pompey continued to chortle until Holt kicked him in the left ass cheek with the arrowhead of one of his burgundy wingtips [...]

The next day a small memo appeared on Pompey’s desk informing him of his promotion to Inspector Second Grade. (25)

The Pompey rumor indicates the degree to which the Department frightens a colored worker with the burden of others seeing his or her hiring as a political stunt. This dynamic challenges black workers themselves with accepting the validity of each other’s employment. Before their confrontation she thinks Pompey sabotaged the Briggs elevator and suspects he “would have jumped at the chance, white foamy saliva smeared across his cheeks. Didn’t he say something to that effect when they were in O’Connor’s [a frequented company nightspot], just after the crash when Lila Mae crouched against the wall like a thief? She’s finally got what’s been coming to her” (83). Interestingly, Lila Mae does not give a legitimate reason why Pompey would stoop so low, other than what she perceives as resentment and Pompey’s self-loathing of his own blackness.

Although Pompey proves innocent, I think his own heated reflection on his rise to elevator inspector sheds some light on his animus toward Lila Mae. While, for her, Pompey’s rant obscures the elevator crash incident, Whitehead indicates it to readers as central in understanding his on-the-job politics. As Pompey puts it,
You come along, strutting like you own the place. Like they don’t own you. […] I was the first colored elevator inspector in history. In history! And you will never, ever know what hell they put me through. You think you have it bad? You have no idea. And it was because I did it first that you’re here now. All my life I wanted to be an elevator inspector. That’s all I wanted to be. And I got it. I was the first colored man to get a Department badge. (195)

One gathers that, as a Negro firster, Pompey has sublimated his anger toward racist coworkers and still harbors bitter memories. Whitehead implies that Pompey hates seeing her follow in his footsteps, driven toward a pseudo-progressive posture. He has endured for years the dilemma in which Lila Mae finds herself. While he has devoted his life to what seems like a progressive track (tokenism), his integrative efforts have only placed Lila Mae in a complicit position, one winnowing her agency down to Department bidding. When Lila Mae confronts him over the bribe he takes from Chancre, making sure certain “buildings make muster when the Department does the follow-up” (194) and calls him on the elevator inspector’s oath, Pompey speaks about the degeneration of the neighborhood around him and about moving his wife and two sons away. Robbed of his agency by his ambition to get a “Department badge,” he resigns to “go to work on Monday like I always do and see what happens” (195). At this point, Lila Mae’s determination betrays her naiveté, not realizing that Pompey’s bitterness has implications for what the job will do to her. Unaware that the Department has coerced her onto this path, she sees Pompey as “a small man on a dirty stoop in an endless city,” and continues her investigation.

Pompey’s economic reality surfaces during their conversation. He does admit to his involvement in Department schemes. However, revising the office rumor, Pompey describes an instance when Chancre calls him into his office and asks him if he needs money. In addition, Chancre questions whether or not Pompey knows about his
friendship with Johnny Shush, a known mob boss. Pompey admits hearing rumors and agrees to a bribe. Realizing he can do so anonymously, he makes sure red-coded buildings pass Department inspections by cleaning up the mistakes made by Shush’s cronies. When Lila Mae scolds him for not keeping his oath, Pompey delivers a diatribe about the socioeconomic conditions he faces: “I was raised in this neighborhood. It’s changed. […] A few years from now, it won’t be reefer [sold] but some other poison. My kids won’t be here when that happens. I need money to take them [his wife and two sons] out of here” (194).

As explained in the passage, Pompey uses the decline of his neighborhood and the safety of his family to justify his choices. Speaking to the lack of opportunity available in demoralized urban areas, Pompey argues that it results from the industrial scramble for profit, which drains communities like his of economic prospects. Thus, for Pompey, the postmodern era to come, which legitimizes cultural difference, does not hold out much hope for his sons even though he himself has gained access to white collar work. Unable to imagine maneuvering (of his own volition) beyond the influence of elite bribery, Pompey forfeits his agency.

Lila Mae’s observations when she first enters his neighborhood get at the crux of the distinctions between their communities. When she spies on Pompey outside his tenement, she takes stock of his neighborhood and family, realizing he lives only two blocks away from her but in a very different place. As the narrator remarks: “On her street she [Lila Mae] is anonymous; the Caribbean immigrants share a code, a broad and secret choreography she is excluded from. But these [Pompey’s neighbors] are American colored” (190). Lila Mae’s neighbors greet each other, wear extravagant hats,
and look out for each other’s children, keeping their less-sanitized behavior indoors. In contrast, Pompey remarks on his neighbors, whose ill habits spill out into the community.

These contrasting areas, though only two blocks apart, make apparent the work of marketers and real estate agents intent on profiting from the contrast between two black groups. Because pro-growth developers understand that African Americans and Caribbean blacks both occupy the space between immigrant and second-class citizenship in America, they not only prey upon the optimism of those seeking a better life but also those hoping in America’s egalitarian ideals. Pompey references a growing drug culture in which African Americans become scapegoats and pawns. The real power brokers maintain their criminal enterprises by decimating communities that suffer from a dearth of economic resources. As Lila Mae ends her conversation with Pompey, “A thin old gentleman with a wooden cane, on his interminable progress up the street stops to wave at him, and Pompey returns the greeting” (195). Whitehead figures the last positive remnants of the neighborhood in the saunter of an elderly man. In doing so, he comes down on the side of “interminable progress,” declaring it a hedge against impediments originating inside or outside black communities. Even in postmodernity, those willing to find new definitions of progress and those willing to locate new routes to achieve this progress can thrive.

Whitehead’s insertion of Raymond “Natchez” Coombs into the black box controversy highlights questions of race consciousness in The Intuitionist. A strong-arm industrial consultant for Arbo Elevators, Inc., Natchez acts very much as a trickster. Surreptitiously installed as a butler at Intuitionist House (the company residence),
Natchez curries favor with Lila Mae through kindness. Lila Mae could use a friend, Natchez determines, as his feigned concern makes him appear an ally. Trailing behind as he leads her to the parlor, wherein elevator bigwigs await, she “wants him parallel, equal” (123). Later, Natchez claims to be Fulton’s nephew, tells of Fulton’s passing for white, and affirms that the black box does exist and that he should reclaim it for African Americans en masse. In the face of Natchez’s ostensible race consciousness, Lila Mae grows skeptical of Fulton. She wonders “did he remain silent, smile politely at their darkie jokes. Tell a few of his own” (139). Cautioning Lila Mae’s cynicism, while playing on her sensitivities to Fulton’s work, Natchez speaks of hearing the brass “talk about his invention, they always saying it’s the future. It’s the future of the cities. But it’s our future, not theirs. It’s ours. And we need to take it back. What he made, this elevator, colored people made that. It’s ours. And I’m going to show that we ain’t nothing. Show them downstairs and the rest of them that we are alive”’ (140). Natchez’s zeal seems pure to Lila Mae because it resonates with the ambition that animates her search for the black box.

However, Natchez exploits Lila Mae’s preference for neutrality. Earlier, she offers a truce to Pompey: “I just want to clear my name—and for you to get what belongs to you” (169). She frames her budding relationship with Natchez as similar to her social contract with the city. If Lila Mae can keep “the city vertical and intact, and the city will leave her alone. And now look at her: she let the city down last Friday, was remiss in her duties, and look at the metropolis’s retribution” (170). Lila Mae believes her neutral “exchange of services” has failed because the contract to which she alludes required that the city (Natchez, the Department, etc.) meet her neutrality with the same
detachment. Yet the industry very much acts in its own interest, treating her as a subject acted upon, rather than as an actor. Ultimately, *Lift* magazine journalist Ben Urich, who penned an article announcing that searchers were close to finding Fulton’s black box, gives Lila Mae the run-down about the political machinery of the elevator world, revealing the latent truth that whoever “owns the elevator owns the new cities” (208). Urich asks, “Did you think this was all about philosophy? Who’s the better man—Intuitionism or Empiricism? No one really give a crap about that. Arbo and United are the guys who make the things. That’s what really matters. The whole world wants to get vertical, and they’re the guys that get them there. If you pay the fare” (208). After Urich exposes Natchez as a corporate spy to Lila Mae, she visits him at Arbo Headquarters.

Acting as what W. Lawrence Hogue describes as a postmodern subject, Raymond “Natchez” Coombs’s character navigates bureaucracy in a clever way. Coombs lends his fidelity to the enterprise end of things, not the political. He spies on Pompey and takes sides against the Guild. In addition, he sabotages Chancre’s verticality demonstration at Funicular Follies, the Guild’s annual celebration. Revealing his motivations to Lila Mae before she learned of his scheme, Natchez says: “‘I wanted to give them a warning, I guess. Of what I’m gonna do to them.’ […] ‘I wanted to get back at them. For what they did to my uncle that messed up his head. For what they did to you’” (168). Though he works for Arbo, he knows that surviving corporate power necessitates that one manufacture his or her own struggle.

10 Describing the postmodern subject as “having many subjective positions” and as a “phenomenon of African American urban reality” (152), W. Lawrence Hogue *Race, Modernity, Postmodernity* posits an accurate description for Raymond Coombs character.
When Lila Mae encounters Coombs at Arbo, he “wears a crisp white oxford shirt punished by gold suspenders—corporate creation as opposed to the coarse fabrics of the man’s former disguise. Those struggling working-man stitches” (248). His voice has morphed from southern drawl to northern finishing-school diction: “He no longer speaks like a colored man from the South. Like Natchez. Nor is his face the same as it was, in this fluorescent light, in this circulated air” (249). Coombs lays bare for Lila Mae the onus behind her fixation on the black box and says it makes her predictable: “‘Let one colored in and you’re integrated. Let two in, you got a race war as they try to kiss up to whitey’” (249). Intent on following her passion, Lila Mae’s brazenness and zeal cloaks the implications of racial progress, which fuel her ambition. Lila Mae at times give short shrift to cultural concerns; she believes that putting forth her best efforts on the job and navigating her way around race will protect her from them. However, Coombs wears a disguise and gains mobility in a corrupt system while Lila Mae’s overt diligence, demonstrated by her perfect inspection record, makes her a target for the wiles of the political and industrial elite.

Coombs’s own agenda stems from the “paying of his dues” for his position at Arbo and his use of the “certain latitude” granted him on the job. Coombs has agency as a Special Projects Executive. He has no interest in keeping his hands clean or paving the way for other blacks but in maintaining his privilege and the company’s bottom line. Though Coombs himself has a family, the novel suggests that he enjoys luxury. To Coombs’s detriment and benefit he gives himself over to corporate corruption for the enjoyment of an executive post. When Lila Mae observes a photograph of his family on his desk, Coombs identifies his wife by her occupational pedigree as a registered nurse,
indicating his career obsession and his distance from a more sentimental attachment to his family. Lila Mae questions Coombs about his knowledge of Fulton’s race. Speaking to Fulton’s racial identity, he declares, “‘No one cares where he came from’” (250). Coombs rebuffs what he reads as the unproductive distraction blacks impose on themselves when seeking the acknowledgement of black achievement from whites.

As Coombs explains, “[T]he rank and file in the industry won’t believe, and those who know care more about his last inventions. His color doesn’t matter once it gets to that level. The level of commerce. They can put Fulton into one of those colored history calendars if they want—it doesn’t change the fact that there’s money to be made from his invention.” The hopelessness of such ventures figures in the stone menagerie located outside Arbo headquarters. The proverbial racial rat race as it manifests in the corporate world involves the putting on display (othering) of tokens and firsters for repetitive glances, while the Department stultifies the agency of these workers. Lila Mae demonstrates an acknowledgement of her condition when she decides against adding another piece, the Arbo Excelsior, to the menagerie outside.

Whitehead’s insertion of James Fulton as a complex character signals an epistemological struggle against industrial capitalism and Fulton’s sense of a postmodern framework for underprivileged workers. Perry Anderson writes in The Origins of Postmodernity that any “hegemony, as Raymond Williams insisted was a ‘dominant’ rather than a total system, one virtually ensuring—because of its selective definitions of reality—the coexistence of ‘residual’ and ‘emergent’ forms resistant to it” (64). While the notion of the residual in postmodern discourse often relegates blacks to an otherness outside postmodernity, Fulton’s philosophy (Intuitionism) acts as both
marginal and foundational to current elevator inspector practices. In addition, Fulton’s research and philosophical development represent his struggle for minority justice and against the assumptions of dominant culture.

Therefore, from the beginning, Whitehead has Fulton write against the inherently biased “all safe” elevation theories of Elisha Grave Otis (the founder of Empiricism). Characteristically, Fulton’s theories are abstract and, by Lila Mae’s estimation, “It was Fulton’s odd perceptions that made him a technical wiz, his way of finding the unobvious solution that is also the perfect solution” (100). However, Fulton builds his theories upon his social reality. As a child, he dreams of places and racial conditions more fluid than those he experiences. But Lila Mae does not fully grasp Fulton’s projections and therefore misreads them. For her, Fulton “knows the other world he describes does not exist. There will be no redemption because the men who run this place do not want redemption” (240). But Fulton neither pursues another literal world nor transcendence he knows he can never find. In a metaphor for elevation, he offers a poignant, if enigmatic, understanding of how one “moves without moving”\(^\text{11}\) in an untenable social moment: “At ninety [the ninetyieth floor], everything is air and the difference between you and the medium of your passage is disintegrating with every increment of the ascension” (222). In short, Fulton longs for ascension, not perfection, in the way he approaches life. This complex notion of striving embedded in Intuitionism,

\(^{11}\) Whitehead signifies on the words of Jim Trueblood’s character in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. The phrase signifies on Trueblood’s ability to escape punishment for the crime of incest. In a similar vein, Fulton wants to move unfettered by race in the elevator industry, which he implies through an extended metaphor about elevators.
which absolves its devotees of the burdensome responsibility of struggling against all racial odds, piques Lila Mae at her core.

As it concerns Fulton’s past, Whitehead shrouds his past in anonymity. Fulton himself seems to have no originary: “Fulton just appeared at the Pierpont School of Engineering one day, eighteen years old, slow of speech, tentative, and proceeded to astound” (100). However, Mrs. Rogers tells the story of a visit from Fulton’s sister that precipitates a stark change in his behavior. Fulton’s sister arrives in tattered clothing and delivers news of their mother’s death. His sister does not reveal his racial identity, but Fulton later informs Mrs. Rogers. Though maintaining business as usual at home, Fulton’s work demeanor drastically changes, often in violent outbursts toward his colleagues. Fulton’s transformation, to which Mrs. Rogers refers also comports with his passing. To contextualize Fulton’s passing, readers must consider the implications of his birth, which the novel implies as the result of rape: “His sister says she knew he was coming that night when their mother came home torn. She says she knew by their mother’s silence and crying after that night that something new was coming into their house, and it turned out to be him [Fulton]” (135). Aside from this presumed atrocity and his own anxieties about racial difference as a child, when an old black man in a town store “steps aside to let him buy his candy” (136), Fulton becomes painfully aware of his whiteness.

When we learn of Fulton’s shift from embattled intellectual to trickster from Mrs. Rogers, we get a posthumous glimpse of a man who has suppressed the deeply painful

12 Jeanne Rosier Smith’s Writing Tricksters sees the “trickster, who embodies a divided, fluid, shifting identity, as a mythic trope for the postmodern (16).
experiences of his childhood. His sister’s visit signals a revision of his worldview, which will live on through Lila Mae. Mrs. Rogers recalls Fulton’s deep laughter as he reads “the first review to describe [his] approach as ‘Intuitionist’: postrational, innate. Human. No wonder he laughed. His prank had succeeded” (238). During his passing years, he developed a critique of the insular, sight-based tenets of white supremacy, turned that premise on its head and then disseminated his theories as more favorable to industrial advancement. As Rogers reports, “He [Fulton] told me—these are his words—‘They were all slaves to what they could see.’ But there was a truth behind that they couldn’t see for the life of them” (239). Fulton’s subtext proves inaccessible to those preoccupied with appearance and with manipulating those appearances to their advantage. Intuitionism subverts the one-sidedness of such a gaze within bureaucracies by locating truth in sociocultural nuances, which those who prefer only to look within their own purview cannot see.

**Revising Cultural Conceptions of Progress**

The phrase “modern city girl,” which Whitehead uses to describe Lila Mae before she comes into self-awareness, bears considerable significance. This description comes to mean a woman driven by hard work, ambition, and justice in a corrupt metropolis, in which men vie for dominance and women occupy a marginal position. Further, with the term modern, Whitehead calls attention to Lila Mae’s attempt to revise her idea of success and to access entitlements typically granted men in the space of patriarchal dominance. Lila Mae’s decision to educate herself, leave the South, and travel North all culminate in her becoming the first black female elevator inspector. Still, for Lila Mae, then, participating in modernity’s tumult means that she is not only enthralled by but also duped by an industry that showcases minority workers for political
gain. In this context, Lila Mae achieves something weighted with symbolic value. She proceeds in accordance to a conception of progress for which her parents’ southern black community will no doubt reward her with positive affirmations. But she must rethink the idea that her job post represents a moment of transcendence.

We see Lila Mae’s modern impulses unravel during her first encounter with Mrs. Rogers. Mrs. Rogers invites Lila Mae into her home because she does not act “like them other men been coming around here, in their city suits all full of themselves” (89). But afterwards Mrs. Rogers speaks to the Department’s racialized assumptions about black solidarity. They assume “I’ll just say what I’ve been keeping because we belong to the same club.” Ever the officer, when Lila Mae can no longer control the conversation, she reveals that she has come in search of Fulton’s missing writings. Mrs. Rogers asks, “‘How’d you get mixed up with these people anyway? […] You all dressed like them, but you must still have some sense.’” Mrs. Rogers’ cross examination brings center stage issues of Lila Mae’s facade and performance. Because Lila Mae’s misguided path of progress hinges on not questioning and on toeing the line from one conformist move to the next, she gets embroiled into modernity’s confusion. Mrs. Rogers makes Lila Mae conscious of her greatest needs—to strike her own path and develop a sense of self, untainted by bureaucratic aims or unquestioned cultural directives.

The battle for perspective that marks their conversation speaks to Lila Mae’s tenuous self-assurance. When giving her credentials, Lila Mae reveals that she attended the Institute of Vertical Technology and considers herself a student of Fulton’s teachings. Mrs. Rogers responds, “I used to see you walking all fast everywhere, like
you had someplace to go and didn’t have no time to get there. You were always walking fast by yourself” (92). Mrs. Rogers then asks, “Was it worth it? All the stuff they put on you?” Embarrassed, Lila Mae responds “I have my badge. I earned my badge.” The badge that she fondles in her pocket quickly becomes a superficial symbol of conformity. Her IVT credentials do not hold sway with Mrs. Rogers. The narrator describes Lila Mae’s face as a “crumpled ball of paper” because the badge itself signifies the corrupt Department’s handling of her and the paper speaks to the ways the likes of Mr. Reed write her destiny and then discard her after she completes their agenda. Moreover, those who sanctioned Lila Mae’s success have co-opted it.

Lila Mae’s second conversation with Mrs. Rogers shows a revised character. Lila Mae desires more than just clearing her name or finding the black box, she now questions things. When Mrs. Rogers opens the door, Lila Mae’s first asks: “‘He was joking, right? About Intuitionism. It was all a big joke’” (232). Reserved earlier because of Lila Mae’s rigidity, the second encounter features a more candid Mrs. Rogers. Mrs. Rogers remarks, “‘Not the same girl who was knocking on my door last week, are you? With your chest all puffed out like a peacock. You’ve seen something between now and then, huh’” (236)? Having excavated Fulton’s works, Lila Mae develops a new literacy in “learn[ing] how to read, like a slave does, one forbidden word at a time” (230). Becoming more self-aware, Lila Mae sees the elevator industry from the vantage of both laborer and power structure. Interestingly, as Mrs. Rogers relates this story to Lila Mae, she retrieves the pieces of her porcelain horse collection, damaged in a recent break-in for Fulton’s paperwork (possibly backed by Arbo). Because thugs damage her collection beyond repair, she cannot restack them on the mantle. Rogers’ collection, in
contrast to the stone menagerie at Arbo, represents a shift in Lila Mae’s complacency in merely serving the industrial machine. Refusing such a simplistic notion of success and engaging a postmodern alternative, Whitehead uses Lila Mae’s vigilance to revise modernity’s narrative of integration as a panacea for America’s racial ills.

On the other side of her conversation with Mrs. Rogers, Lila Mae undergoes a kind of transformation. To fully understand the unraveling of cultural conceptions of progress in *The Intuitionist*, readers must consider Lila Mae’s range of worldviews. Whitehead’s protagonist develops from a by-the-book technician into a complex character that questions her fidelity to the elevator industry and Intuitionism. She also matures as a student; from one dependent on the ideas of her predecessors into one confident enough to formulate her own truths. Lila Mae no longer views progress as dedication to an industry or a cultural narrative.

By becoming self-aware and realizing a postmodern perspective, Lila Mae turns the tables on her ideas of transcendence, emerging as the puppet master of a corrupt industry and political system. She sees herself as gearing up for the postmodern city to come. Over the course of her struggles, she develops a forward looking insight: “That she was a citizen of the city to come and that the frail devices she had devoted her life to were weak and would all fall one day like Number Eleven” (255). In short, she adopts a critical framework conducive to the postmodern society to come, projected in Fulton’s works. Lila Mae has asserted her right as an individual to create the world around her opposite the will of industry magnates.

Though Lila Mae starts from a very limited imagination, Whitehead charges her with contextualizing what Fulton’s theories might imply about postmodern society. At
first, Lila Mae rejects the notion that the black box will change the way the world looks at elevators. Questioning what the perfect elevator would look like, she concludes “We don’t know because we can’t see inside it, it’s something we cannot imagine, like the shape of angels teeth. It’s a black box” (61). For her, Fulton describes in his works an elevator world, “and a world needs inhabitants to make it real. The black box is the elevator-citizen for the elevator world” (100). From the vantage of the citizen, Lila Mae begins rethinking Fulton’s Volume One of Theoretical Elevators on her own terms.

At the novel’s core, Whitehead offers the possibility of second elevation as the redemptive key to postmodernity. For Lila Mae, the second elevation (a key concept in Intuitionism) will prove useful in negotiating the coming postmodern era because it has to do with the complexities of African American mobility. Lila Mae intuits that workplace racial integration, in and of itself, will not enable African Americans to become elevator-citizens (or upwardly mobile individuals) of the world—though this mobility comes with challenges. As Dubey notes in her study of the novel, “Intuitionism is presented as an epistemological standpoint likely to be most appealing to those who suffer most from the racial order of modern cities” (240). Moreover, the second elevation foregrounds Intuitionist philosophy, in that it metaphorically links black progress with achieving a level of thinking that no longer sees tokenism or narratives that do not come out of one’s own “articulate self-awareness” (229), as viable options for a progressive politics in postmodern America.

Lila Mae extrapolates with Fulton’s Volume Two and with the crux of his ideas. At this point, “her creations adhere to the spiritual side of Fulton’s words, while the rest of the movement gets dizzy in the more recondite apocrypha” (133). Lila Mae’s next
phase happens after her investigation into Fulton’s missing notes takes several twists and turns. She now critiques the source by questioning Fulton’s philosophy. Squaring the Briggs elevator incident with the discovery that Fulton passed for white, she asks, “Is his black box immune to the comet of the catastrophic accident” (229). Lila Mae interprets accidents as moments of revision, “instructing the dull and plodding citizens of modernity that there is a power beyond rationality” (231); one must equip this type of fluidity in postmodernity. In this passage, Lila Mae brings her understanding down to the reality of the compromised agency of black workers, and in an epiphany, decides Fulton’s Intuitionist theory is a literal joke. Yet profound meaning inheres in Fulton’s critique of Empiricism. Those who take the industry at face value cannot ascertain the structures of power behind the elevator companies. As a result, they find themselves in a futile search for success.

Lila Mae, in a postmodern revision of her idea of progress, now looks beyond the “skin of things” (239). Lila Mae learns to trust in her own insight and eschews an overreliance on either the obvious or the abstract. Comprehending the ways in which whites co-opt black agency and thwart true self-determination, Lila Mae discerns the ways in which she, though disconnected from the seats of power, perpetuated the status quo. Reflecting on a lesson she learns from Pompey, she thinks: Pompey gave them a blueprint for colored folk. [....] How eager they would be for a piece of the dream that they would do anything for massa. She hated her place in their world, where she fell in their order of things, and blamed Pompey, her shucking shadow in the office. She could not see him anymore than anyone else in the office saw him” (239).
Now she sees Pompey as more than just a jaded worker. Squaring her growth with Fulton’s, Lila Mae “knew he was joking because he hated himself. She understood this hatred of himself; she hated something in herself and she took it out on Pompey. Now she could see Fulton for what he was. There was no way he believed in transcendence” (240). Her own growth mirrors Fulton’s. Adopting an anti-transcendent viewpoint, Lila Mae opts for designation. After receiving Fulton’s incomplete *Theoretical Elevators Volume Three* from Rogers, she dupes Coombs, Chancre, and Ben Urich and industry bigwigs by sending to them copies of Fulton’s deliberately incomplete black box. Isolating herself in an undisclosed location, Lila Mae plays upon the elevator world’s obsession with futurity by complicating the fragmentation of Fulton’s text. As they aggressively pursue the perfect elevator, “[i]f it is not time she will send out more of Fulton’s words to let them know it is coming” (255). Lila Mae now helms the confusion and steers the economic and political machine as puppet master of the elevator industry.

In *The Intuitionist*, Lila Mae rejects neutrality for an anonymity that restores her agency. The uncertainty she experiences in her modern environment both compels adaptation and challenges the hegemonic domination of the elevator industry. Whitehead concerns himself with staging African Americans’ encounters in the workplace and illustrating the sociopolitical tensions that arise among those who occupy the precarious positions of token and Negro firster and must re-appropriate the otherness foisted upon them. Therefore, Lila Mae’s transformation takes shape when she revises her conceptions of progress, which in her case, define success as earning a formal education, leaving behind her southern community, and obtaining a coveted
career. By the end of the novel, Whitehead’s message rings through. Individual ambition winds up tethered to the calculating agendas of the powerful, rendering African American self-efficacy moot.

Whitehead’s novel sets in motion the appropriation of system tactics by those marginalized within the system. In Political Machines: Governing a Technological Society, Andrew Barry argues that “All too often, postmodernism involves a different form of reduction—a reduction to complete fragmentation or fluidity—in which any sense of texture and difference is lost” (21). To avoid this trend, Whitehead elevates African American experience to a significant level of political importance in the novel. Specifically, The Intuitionist portrays the sociocultural endeavors of black workers and the dominant political apparatus on an even keel in terms of the ebb and flow of autonomy. Moreover, he avoids glossing over the uphill battle black characters in the novel face, particularly with their own modern assumptions.

Beginning with Lila Mae, prior to her awakening, she thought of the new citizens as white elites, “the cosmopolitan darlings out on the town, tipped martini glasses and stroked silver cigarette cases engraved with their initials and called the bartender by his name” (176). Whitehead juxtaposes the new citizen/city notion Fulton heralds in his black box with what Urich mentions in his broad-based understanding of the status quo of corporations, financing campaigns, and the modern elevator enterprise. Whitehead links characters like Pompey, Natchez, and even Fulton to modern individualism, each dispirited in their own way, while he deems intuition a prime quality of those new (or postmodern) citizens. For Pompey, the system of modern elevators “is a white man’s world. They make the rules” (195). The corporate spy Raymond “Natchez” Coombs
says, “‘I’ve paid my dues’” and “is more surprised at being interrupted at his paperwork than at her [Lila Mae’s] appearance in his office. He removes his tortoise-shell glasses and places them in his shirt pocket” (248). Disillusioned, Fulton “secretes his venom into the pages of a book. He knows the other world he describes does not exist. There will be no redemption because the men who run this place do not want redemption. They want to be as near to hell as they can” (240). Lila Mae’s encounter with these different perspectives affords her “a space in which to imagine things differently,” not a reason for completely rejecting all she knows. With a line scribbled in the margins of his notebook: “Lila Mae Watson is the one” (253), Fulton intuits that if such a city could ever exist, Lila Mae would spearhead its construction.

Ultimately, Lila Mae co-opts the othering process to which the elevator industry subjects her from the beginning. As she theorizes, “Intuitionism is communication. That simple. Communication with what is not-you” (241). For example, Lila Mae recalls attending church with her parents as a child and then no longer attending when she comes North. Yet she does not reduce religion to something useless but re-imagines it for her purposes: “Anyone can start a religion. They just need the need of others.” In the end, we see Lila Mae achieve balance between fragmentation and fluidity. She manipulates the industry status quo and city officials alike with her intuition.

Whitehead’s The Intuitionist probes modern notions of rationality, humanism, and black progress that stall self-determination. The text moves in opposition to modern discourse with a postmodern evaluation of black ideas of success and survival within industrial capitalism. Whitehead implements a revisionist stance to long-held assumptions of cultural sacrifice and respectability by introducing self-awareness
among social-climbing black workers. Lastly, *The Intuitionist* concerns itself with difference in a system that thwarts a true fluidity of viewpoints and co-opts opposing ideas. While the novel tests the mettle of black integrative progress, it launches a postmodern investigation of both the cultural and socioeconomic quandary of African Americans experience in modern and contemporary industry.
CHAPTER 3
RESTLESS QUESTIONING: PSYCHOLOGICAL ANGST IN ALICE WALKER’S
MERIDIAN

In her 1998 study *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*, Claudia Tate uses psychoanalysis to investigate the multiple ways African American literature textualizes desire. Tate argues that a number of African American novels project “unsocialized desire,” which elicits discomfort in readers because it does not constitute a familiar (or collective) racial discourse. In turn, literary criticism represses these desires by freighting the subjectivity of black authors with the weight of US racial history even as they try to affirm personal experiences. Not seeking to psychoanalyze authors, Tate investigates “novels that reflect how their respective authors uniquely combined emotional and cognitive meaning in the production of the works” (15). Tate also questions “how black texts construct textual meaning out of specific material and cultural circumstances as well as personal authorial longings—conscious and unconscious” (15). Her investigation, which does not dismiss racial politics, can advance a reading of novels premised upon psychological anguish. Significantly, the emphasis on psychological anguish in African American literature shows up as writers illustrate diverging vantage points on historical moments. Because postmodernity problematizes issues like desire itself, writers can hone in on the emotional and the psychological forces that have always attended historical contestation.

This chapter looks at the representation of psychological angst in African American fiction, which I identify most keenly in Alice Walker’s *Meridian*. Authors deploy this phenomenon to imagine the gut-wrenching nature of resistance to the status quo and how this preps individuals for postmodern conditions. At its core, this
observation not only clarifies the dismissal of individual concerns by figureheads
privileging a given agenda but also illuminates the anguish visited upon those voluntarily
bearing this burden. Writers portray protagonists as beset not only by their respective
communities and society but also by their personal convictions.

**Alice Walker’s Range and Representation**

Along with her contemporaries Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Paule
Marshall, and Gloria Naylor, Walker brings an informed perspective on the emotional
and spiritual strivings of black women. Out of their sharing of thematic interests,
incorporation of agrarian folk elements, and emphasis on thwarted female energies,
grew contemporary notions of Black Feminism and Black Women’s Studies.¹ No doubt
Walker’s oeuvre has seen a plethora of critical readings as several literary theorists,
including Marjorie Pryse, Debra Walker King, Houston Baker, and Susan Willis have
written about her effect on African American literary studies and theory.²

Notwithstanding, some social scientific readings of Walker’s fiction have emerged
alongside literary criticism, as her work complicates disciplinary boundaries. For
example, anthropologist Faye Harrison describes Walker as “one of anthropology’s less

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¹ In *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, Jacqueline Bobo considers the creativity of black women and
emphasizes the merits of analyzing the artistic output of black women, according to its historical and
political dimensions, etc., in academic contexts. The editors of *Still Brave: The Evolution of Black
Women’s Studies* pay homage to the development and significance of Black Women’s Studies programs
to the academy. Born of much intellectual and social striving, the program challenges “disciplines such as
history, art history, sociology, and literary studies to acknowledge and seriously address the
intersectionality of identity” (xxiii).

² Through the positing of a cultural spirit; the establishment of a historically symbolic grammar of folk
cultural terms; the articulation of a return to communal consciousness and language; and the affirmation
of a folk cultural and spiritual matrix that resists the interests of domination, Walker’s fiction resonates
broadly. Marjorie Pryse’s *Conjuring, Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*; Debra King’s *Deep
Talk: Reading African American Literary Names*; Houston’s Baker’s *Workings of the Spirit*; and Susan
Willis’s *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* all explore Walker’s Spirit motif in
some way.
visible interlocutors” (123) because of her inclusion of discursive systems, communal configurations, and cultural contexts. Similarly, Melvin Dixon in *Ride Out the Wilderness* provides a geographical reading of Walker’s fiction in its vacillation between the North and the South and concern with land and identity.

Most explicitly, Walker’s novels exemplify her notion of a womanist view, and her concern for spiritual, cultural, and psychological angst, among women and men. In this way, she thinks through the road to self-awareness and links this dynamic to history. Contemplating several challenges African Americans have faced throughout American history, Walker’s *The Color Purple* examines the post-Civil War/Reconstruction period, *Meridian* critiques the Civil Rights Movement, and *Temple of My Familiar* connects ancient history and African cosmology with late twentieth century life. For the purposes of my argument, I focus on *Meridian*, which Deborah McDowell describes as Walker’s “most artistically mature work.” The novel portrays a revolutionary consciousness that would be ideal in a postmodern context. Furthermore, I find *Meridian* relevant to my reading of the personal adjustments to culture and society, which individuals must make in the postmodern era. Walker’s earlier novels lack the renegotiation of black political projects and do not portray the facing off against oppressive structures.

My argument diverges from the aforementioned observations by homing in on political and institutional repression while simultaneously delving into the structures of mainstream America and their impact on racial minorities. I argue that Walker, in

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3 Walker coins this term, which she sees as more germane to the challenges black women face, as distinguished from white feminist perspectives, in her collection *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* and describes it as “referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior” and “Committee to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (xi).

4 See “The Self in Bloom: Alice Walker’s Meridian”
Meridian, performs a postmodern interrogation of the alienating nature of Civil Rights Movement leadership wherein activists find their individual convictions eclipsed by the group agenda. In complicating the status quo, Walker considers the Movement from the activist’s perspective and highlights the activist’s restless will to question domineering institutions. Ultimately, the individual autonomy that sparks postmodern change opens up new possibilities for realizing those convictions.

The Protocols of Psychological Angst

In Reconstructing Womanhood (1987), Hazel Carby’s disavowal of the term tradition established a strong foundation from which to explore psychology in black women’s literature. Focused on acknowledging the fluid historical reality behind black women’s fiction, Carby takes as her point of departure the uneven relations around race, class, and gender, and provides “a materialist account of the cultural production of black women intellectuals within the social relations that inscribed them” (17). A reading of psychological anguish hinges on the representation of social and political proscription in black communities and institutions. Barbara Christian “characterize[s] Walker’s work as organically spare rather than elaborate, ascetic rather than lush, a process of stripping off layers, honing down to the core” (Everyday Use: Alice Walker 124). This thought-provoking quality marks Walker’s process as a deep exploration of historical moments that have had lasting effects both within black communities and on the collective conscious of America. Likewise, her fiction captures the effect of black women and men’s historical memory, which does not enable a cathartic release necessarily but causes mental labor and ambivalence.

Novels about psychological angst demonstrate how the emotional and spiritual undercurrents of race inform social reality. In addition, they articulate the mental
weightiness of postmodern experience. As a characteristic, such texts feature interiority in a way that sees the individual beleaguered by political and educational institutions. These works often deploy what comes across as overindulgence in psychological unease or as extended self-confrontation. In either case, African American writers that deploy these tactics enter into an ongoing cultural conflict brought on by an inattention to the strivings of black individuals.

While a reading of psychological and emotional labor appears to privilege interiority over harsher exterior concerns like material deprivation, contemporary writers do not take the former without equitable attention to the latter. Because the legacy of black struggle speaks to confrontation in American history, literature presupposes a protagonist’s burdensome relationship to social instability. Walker especially possesses a keen eye for the historical realities and racial politics depicted in her work, through which she has written herself into the ranks among foremost American writers. In postmodern times, African American women and men find themselves ever mindful of the legacy of Civil Rights but also aware of their vulnerabilities to economic and cultural alienation in a global era. Novels about psychological angst engage issues such as displacement, education, and late capitalism/market competition. As authors bring Tate’s “authorial longings” and “unsocialized desire” to the fore, they verbalize the nagging notions of civil rights activism. By angling the lens to show a different perspective, even in fiction, writers can make the personal political in a deeper sense of contemporary striving. But the volatility that emerges leans less toward reconciliation than toward a fragmentation, which authors prefer to the obscuring of black psychological anguish. When we look at Walker’s vantage toward the constraints of
intraracial tradition in *Meridian*, we see her elaboration on a milieu that becomes oppressive to young activists.

The emphasis on the black psyche that has characterized African American literature since the 1970s has earned political import. Gene Andrew Jarrett examines the political value of African American literature by making the case that “racial representation in African American literary history has consistently endeavored to overthrow racial injustice” (*Representing the Race* 6). One literary tool has been narrative representation, which make readers question their own attitudes about race and promotes social action. Sociologist Robert Washington, in *The Ideologies of African American Literature*, acknowledges the impact of African American literature on American race relations and black communities. Yet he concerns himself with the fact that mainstream ideological forces that shaped dominant literary works may have eclipsed black social consciousness. Lyotard’s stance cautions us to be skeptical of dominant ideologies. Discussing postmodernism, Lyotard describes this process as “incredulity toward metanarratives”—the rejection of the West’s grand narratives about modernity that exclude the perspectives of marginalized groups (xxiv). Walker follows Lyotard’s sentiment when she rejects the legitimation of people and ideas by elite power structures in *Meridian*.

Just as the literary and social spheres experienced ideological battles, in the wake of white racial backlash in the South and North during the fifties and sixties, the public forum gets called upon to set an agreeable tone around race relations. Garth Pauley’s *The Modern Presidency and Civil Rights* evaluates presidential rhetoric on racial crisis. Throughout the early twentieth century, segregation forced the intervention of Dwight
Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy. Their respective national addresses described racial issues as sullying “the national reputation in the eyes of the world” and as a “moral issue” (215). Black American consciousness having been impacted by political forces has no doubt grown accustomed to a healthy skepticism toward the motivations and efforts of any leadership. James Fendrich’s Ideal Citizens: The Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement looks at recent misconceptions about civil rights activists. While several movements centered on student politics, race, and gender sprang up amid the Civil Rights Movement, “popular psychological theories of mindless, irrational contagion” discredited activists’ commitment (xxi).

As an accounting of the social agendas in black communities must include some attention to history, black literary criticism looks at the politics of writing historical narratives. Keith Byerman argues that “contemporary narratives are trauma stories in that they tell of both tremendous loss and survival; they describe the psychological and social effects of suffering. More important, perhaps, they tell of the erasure of such history and, as a consequence, its continued power to shape black life” (3). Because Byerman concerns himself with black suffering, he turns to trauma theory’s notion of recovery, which compels a reading of the stories of those lives eclipsed by repression. Even in fictive representations, Byerman does insert a caveat about the difficulties of ascribing therapeutic possibilities to postmodern literature. Meridian demands that it be taken as serious literature by complicating our understanding of a historical movement. In particular, Meridian portrays the activist’s tense relationship to autocratic leadership and highlights the ways individual autonomy can rebuff rigid practices. Moreover,
Walker gives a portrait of Fendrich’s “ideal citizen” that relentlessly challenges the status quo in university, state, and national politics at large.

In an interview with William Ferris entitled “Alice Walker: I Know What the Earth Says,” Walker speaks to the impetus behind *Meridian*:

In *Meridian*, I started out being really concerned about some of the things people did to each other in the sixties, in the name of change, in the name of revolution. I wanted to see what qualities we were giving up in exchange for other qualities. Somehow part of it really understands the questions, not just understands the answers. (14)

If the novel gives attention to questions arising out of revolution, then it must pose answers that complicate ideas about revolution. Nearly twenty years earlier, Karen Stein in her essay “*Meridian*: Alice Walker’s Critique of Revolution” discusses the evolution of Walker’s thoughts on revolution. For Stein, Walker’s appraisal of the Civil Rights Movement in 1967 changed in her writing of *Meridian* to favor spiritual transformation and psychological stability over militant resistance.

The gendering of the emotional commitment made by civil rights activists as feminine unfolds in fiction and then becomes more nuanced in social science research. For example, Evelyn White suggests that one of *Meridian*’s “most incendiary complaints was that of black women who had given their lifeblood to the movement only to be forsaken by black men” (285). Walker not only acknowledges the psychological burdens borne by women during this era but also the nuances of their marginal leadership. Twenty years after the Movement, a core of ideals surfaces in Anne Standley’s essay “The Role of Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement” on the hindsight of black women activists. They identify the Movement with its “liberating effect” on their sense of self, with it becoming an “inseparable part” of their identity, and with blacks “overcoming circumstances that degraded them” (185-187). Walker’s and
Standley’s works inform the ethos around a Movement furthered by black women and maintained by their sacrifice and development in contemporary times.

**Apathy and Postmodern Resistance**

In *Meridian*, Walker underscores fidelity to the cause of social justice in black communities affected by the status quo of American racial injustice during the 1960s. The novel explores the life of its eponymous protagonist Meridian Hill, a precocious southern youth, and her colleague Truman Held, an embattled artist and activist. Quiet and unassuming, Meridian gets whisked into adult life and marriage after becoming pregnant by a high school lover. At 17 years of age, she marries her lover at the behest of her mother, drops out of high school, and assumes the role of wife and mother, though unprepared for either. At first oblivious to the racial politics that surround her Georgia home, Meridian matures into a socially conscious activist and commits to the Civil Rights Movement. From there, she attends college and develops fainting spells that result in both psychological and political awakening.

By her side stands Truman, who becomes a brief lover, and, though vigilant in the freedom struggle as well, indulges his bourgeois values. He later becomes jaded over racial animus within the Movement. Their lives fragment in multiple ways and intersect at multiple points. Shoudering the weight of the Movement, Meridian’s road forks from a relationship with Truman to interactions with a cadre of militant revolutionaries, and then to a relentless squaring off against the political agendas of figureheads, which diminish black ambition. The fragmentation of black freedom movements, the rise of

5 "A Matter of Focus: Men in the Margins of Alice Walker’s fiction" by Erna Kelly gives insight into Walker’s penchant for casting othering her male characters and making them brutal. Kelly sees Walker moving away from this trend in *Meridian* and entertaining wholeness and healing for all.
the black middle class, and the changes in politics and race relations during the 1960s all bring about sociopolitical alienation and apathy. The lives of Meridian and Truman reflect the tectonic shifts that precipitate a postmodern American society.

In an early chapter containing an epigraph of assassinated revolutionaries from Medgar Evers to Viola Liuzzo, Walker weaves in the novel's earliest passage commenting on the 1960s and the onset of postmodernity:

It was a decade marked by death. Violent and inevitable. Funerals became engraved on the brain, intensifying the ephemeral nature of life. For many in the South it was a decade reminiscent of earlier times, when oak trees sighed over their burdens in the wind; Spanish moss dragged bloody to the ground; amen corners creaked with grief; and the thrill of being able, once again, to endure unendurable loss produced so profound an ecstasy in mourners that they strutted, without noticing their feet, along the thin backs of benches: their piercing shouts of anguish and joy never interrupted by an inglorious fall. They shared rituals for the dead to be remembered. But now television became the repository of memory, and each onlooker grieved alone. (21)

This passage headlines a chapter that features Anne-Marion and Meridian in the honors house watching a televised broadcast of President John F. Kennedy’s funeral. Anne-Marion observes Meridian’s grief, and intrigued by Meridian’s emotions, offers her a sweater. Embedded in Walker’s commentary, rests her observation of an era of great tragedy now modulated by a shift in the sense of group solidarity. The absence of solidarity mentioned in the final line does not only signal a bygone era that we should bemoan, but it directs our attention to the onlooker that grieves for the fallen. Throughout the novel, Walker begins positing conscious individuality as an option in the midst of postmodern conditions.

Walker’s exploration of the Civil Rights Movement has implications for the glimpses of the postmodern era we see throughout Meridian. Walker views civil rights conditions as indexed by the struggles not of affluent movement figureheads but of
minor participants determined to support causes for freedom in the most personal ways. Suffocating leadership acts as the nemesis of the individual in *Meridian*. It seeks to silence women, quell deep intellectual and emotional energy and demand solidarity. Within this dynamic, sacrificing oneself for the Movement becomes the order of the day, yet the novel challenges this trend. Discussing 1960s radical politics and the postmodern, Marianne DeKoven in *Utopia Limited* highlights a “conception of power and resistance as shifting, multidirectional, local, partial […] dynamic flows rather than massive dualisms of domination and revolution” (256). De Koven’s observation speaks to activists’ ability to conceive of the Movement not as a monolith but as a program rife with competing ideas both inside and outside its ranks. That said, Walker’s characters demonstrate the postmodern when they go against the tenets held by staid leadership, when they impose on themselves the responsibility of changing society for the better, risking their own psyches to combat apathy. Meridian’s postmodern practice, in particular, involves the voluntary imposition of psychological burdens upon herself for the cause of revolution.

Throughout the novel, Meridian demonstrates political nuance, but as she matures her life illustrates the mutability of postmodern conditions. She operates according to Linda Hutcheon’s sense of postmodernism: “The postmodern impulse is not to seek any total vision. It merely questions. If it *finds* such a vision, it questions how, in fact, it *made* it” (48). In this way, Meridian resists her own demise. In a society rife with ambivalence, Meridian she survives by questioning her life. When her queries alienate her from loved ones, she must stand fast on self-awareness. Ultimately, Meridian experiences renewal in the midst of the disabling trauma of her life.
Very much the nonlinear novel, Walker utilizes innovation in *Meridian* by featuring temporal shifts and placing readers in medias res. Describing this postmodern sense of time as one that links “political—economic and cultural processes” (201), David Harvey, in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, offers an interesting framework for examining the novel’s structure. Thematically, *Meridian* portrays the moral dilemmas that civil rights activists faced. In discussing postmodern ethics, Zygmunt Bauman describes a “pluralism of rules,” whereby postmodernity trades out the burden of ethical responsibility for a vexing ambivalence about moral choice. *Meridian*’s dilemma sends her yearning for a cause to champion. Henry Kariel’s *The Desperate Politics of Postmodernism* observes the politics behind revolutionary movements. He describes a revolutionary politics as one that gives attention to the need to maintain “one’s balance in a world in which crisis and emergency are not discrete moments but a universal condition […]” (92). In Bauman’s text, as in Kariel’s, moral ambivalence paralyzes resistance. Neither critic can view this issue as positive in the political or cultural sense. Because Walker’s novel embraces the challenge of moral responsibility in an environment that relishes its absence, her protagonist must come to terms with and act on her own convictions.

Nancy Fraser’s and Linda Nicholson’s notion of postmodern feminism offers insight on the analysis of history, which bears significance for what Walker achieves in *Meridian*. In their argument, “the postmodern critique need forswear neither large historical narratives nor analyses of societal macrostructures” but must critique sexism’s embedded history in contemporary society (34). As a character, *Meridian* embodies this critical approach in her willingness to analyze, dispense with, and adapt to the endless
variety of traditions, movements, and agendas against which she struggles. In this way, she can wade through the stultifying structures of postmodern society.

**Civil Rights and Meridian’s Awareness**

In observing the impact of the Civil Rights Movement on budding revolutionaries experiencing their own ideological turns, Walker delves into black activists' commitment to revolutionary aims, capturing the depth of individual restlessness and the toll it exacts. Her fiction explores the conflict between politics, education, and society through Meridian’s activism. While an activist, Meridian’s own development becomes symbiotic with that of the Movement. But Meridian must mature politically and emotionally. As she advocates for the ideals of the movement (voting rights, nonviolence, demonstrations, etc.), she begins to look at the freedom struggle from a different vantage, questioning its effectiveness.

As Walker takes as its backdrop the nonviolent protests and voting rights efforts of the 1960s, her protagonist takes revolutionary ideals to task. Writers like Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor often imbue their female characters with nonconformist sensibilities. Walker as well works with themes centered on issues of womanism that include an examination of patriarchal culture and the struggles of coming-of-age youth. Meridian must cope on multiple ideological fronts, in the arenas of Saxon College, the Atlanta Movement, and rural southern communities. These experiences act as a blessing for her—helping her come to terms with the freedom struggle while at the same time navigating the tensions that grow out of it. In addition, considering the implications of revolutionary black womanhood, Walker situates her protagonist in a male-dominated movement, and has her champion those revolutionary values long after her counterparts abandon the struggle. Not only does Meridian combat the existential
threat of judgment and co-optation as an educated black woman and activist but also she manages the fragmentation of her psyche by coming to terms with her own ambivalence.

As Alan Nadel’s essay “Reading the Body: Alice Walker’s *Meridian*” explains, “*Meridian* can be read as an attempt to mend the ruptures and reconstruct an alternative black tradition from its contemporary American artifacts. The novel conducts an historical search in that it tries to recontextualize the past” (56). In *Meridian*, Walker signifies on the many unnamed activists, volunteers, and grassroots efforts for enfranchisement and freedom by engaging the often unarticulated psychological angst over the snubbing of individual desire. Walker’s discourse on psychological anguish champions the individuality of workers participating in a broad-based movement. Individuals leave behind institutional and cultural spaces for the purpose of realizing their autonomy. Whereas we tout heterogeneity as a given in the postmodern era, dedicated individuals maintained, throughout the Civil Rights Movement, the ongoing struggle for cultural pluralism in American civil society. Walker’s *Meridian* does not take this struggle for granted. Rather, it criticizes the idea that unquestioned solidarity remains essential in social movements. The novel suggests that when it comes to interfacing with dominant institutions, any movement would benefit from intellectual nuance among its members.

*Meridian* disperses protest movements throughout local communities and makes them infectious. The violence enacted against these entities initiates an eye-opening moment for Meridian. She typically lives in a fog of unconcern. Nonetheless, Meridian one day saunters through her neighborhood and passes a black family’s house where
she sees white people milling about. When she makes it home, the television reports that a voter registration drive will begin at that particular house and move throughout the neighborhood. The following morning the news mentioned that the house along with others on that same street had been firebombed, killing three small children. Walker’s insertion of this event calls to mind the racially motivated 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, which resulted in the death of four black girls. This experience stirs an emotional and psychological response in Meridian—a collision with American racial realities. Having lived in this town her whole life, “it was that one day in the middle of April in 1960 Meridian Hill became aware of the past and present of the larger world” (70). As her innocence shatters, Meridian ponders whether or not the people at the voting house know something she does not.

Meridian’s mediated introduction to the Movement has a profound effect upon her consciousness. Afterwards, she takes her son to her mother-in-law’s and sits in front of her bedroom window, reflecting on her life. Meridian undergoes one of several transformations here:

At first it was like falling back into a time that never was, a time of complete rest, like a faint. Here senses were stopped, while her body rested; only in her head did she feel something, and it was a sensation of lightness—a lightness like the inside of a drum. The air inside her head was pure of thought, at first. For hours she sat by the window looking out, but not seeing the pecan trees bending in the wind, or the blue clouded sky, or the grass. (71)

Seeking pureness of thought or expecting she will find such a thing proves futile. She does however wade through ignorance to emerge more conscious of her own circumstances. Meridian reckons with the responsibilities of motherhood, thinks beyond the burdensome nature of marriage, and recognizes a future for herself that has heretofore been absent. With this sensibility, she ventures beyond her usual confines.
For Walker, the space of black protest into which Meridian enters affords her more mindfulness. Meridian shifts from lacking purpose to volunteering in the neighborhood voter registration drive.

In her newfound motivation, Meridian empowers others with voting rights and political action in her own community. The black townspeople commend Meridian for “doing a good thing: typing, teaching illiterates to read and write, demonstrating against segregated facilities and keeping the Movement house open when the other workers returned to school” (82). Like her father, she has a strong political core. Mr. Hill identified with Native Americans and their marginalization and providing land reparation for the wrongs perpetrated against them. However, her mother does not share their sentiment and feels that Meridian is wasting her life. Beyond denigrating civil rights protestors, Mrs. Hill accepts the infallibility of every institution around her and resigns herself to an apolitical life. Nonetheless, while the community celebrates the Movement’s efforts, they can neither account for the battle fatigue endured by individual volunteers nor the psychological trauma visited upon those that give not only their bodies to the movement but also their emotions. Meridian recalls inviting a young woman named Anne to join in a demonstration. Anne gets separated from her during a lunch-counter demonstration. After the police officers arrest them, Meridian can hear Anne’s screams from a distant cell, “and though she never saw her again, she began to imagine she did, and the screams became an accompaniment of the guilt already weighing her down” (96).

The Movement constitutes another system with its own bureaucracy, which alienates Meridian and other volunteers. This system encourages revolutionary practice
via individual sacrifice for the good of group. For instance, Meridian’s first march
exemplifies the distance between the leadership and the workers. The strategy dictates
that every volunteer not previously arrested in another protest should face off against
the police so the early demonstrators will get released. The top-down politics deployed
by Movement figureheads concerns the workers closest to the violence and subsumes
the concerns of the protestors.

Though cathartic in a number of ways for Meridian, the Movement compounds her
personal challenges and spills over into her education. After graduating from Saxon
College, Meridian has no intention of leading a life of bourgeois values but identifies
wholly with the disenfranchised. Perhaps in writing a postmodern interrogation of mid-
twentieth century civil rights struggles, Walker creates a condition for her protagonist
that adheres to the definitions page included in the novel’s early pages. In the (a)
clause of definition number 6 (“a place or situation with its own distinctive character”),
Walker posits the possibility that Meridian can draw from the wealth of critical
knowledge available in the arena of civil rights and higher education to begin informing
her own politics and following that path with conviction.

**Women and the Movement**

Walker carefully paints a clear picture of the Civil Rights Movement’s influence on
women, including those whose circumstances the Movement does not address on the
proverbial agenda. Through Meridian, the novel challenges dehumanizing practices
against women by allowing them to incite Meridian’s political fervor. She brings her civil
rights energy to bear on campus. Meridian has several experiences involving female
tragedy, both on campus and while canvassing voters, which taken together, catalyze
the paralyzing illness she later experiences. The Wild Child, a homeless young black
girl, ends up pregnant, and gets killed by a speeding driver. Meridian also learns of the
tales of Louvinie and Fast Mary. Louvinie, an enslaved West African has her tongue cut
out for telling a ghost story that literally frightens the master's son (who has a heart
problem) to death. Fast Mary concealed her pregnancy out of shame, murders her
baby, and commits suicide three months later. For Meridian, these events converged at
the site of The Sojourner, a large magnolia tree at the center of campus, where students
riot and ultimately destroy the tree because they are prohibited from having Wild Child's
funeral in the campus chapel. While the novel southern patriarchal ethos rehearses
severe punishment for those who violate conventions, Meridian’s resistance serves to
critique such practices.

Walker reacts against this entire system by creating an environment in which
Meridian neither takes up the weaker sex role nor the mule-of-the-world mantle
historically prescribed for black women. In the beginning of the novel, the “Marilene
O’Shay” circus exhibit displays the corpse of a murdered woman. This results from the
state-pardoned murder on the part of her cuckolded husband who shoots her lover and
strangles her, dumping both their bodies into salt lake. Walker’s critique aims not only
at harnessing these atrocities but also forcing patriarchal authority to own them.
However, as it concerns Meridian’s activism, readers must note that she resists the
diminishment of issues important to her. Meridian tweaks the philosophies of Miss
Winter and Anne-Marion, two influential people in her life, to cultivate her own struggle
for freedom.

Miss Winter grew up in the same community as Meridian, graduated from Saxon
College herself, and acts as a contrarian figure that at first has to purge her feelings of
no longer being the only person from her town to attain such a pedigree. While the text does not speak specifically to her involvement in any auxiliary of the Civil Rights Movement, she practices revolution in her own way, we learn of Miss Winter’s radical politics when she teaches Meridian both in high school and at Saxon College. In the former, when Meridian objects to reciting a speech on the virtues of the Constitution, she reassures her reservations. In the latter, she visits Meridian when she falls ill at in college. One of three black faculty members on campus, Miss Winter has a misfit reputation on campus, teaches jazz, spirituals, and blues in her classes and stands against the administration’s efforts to make her conform and to oust her: “her fights with the president and the college dean could be heard halfway across the campus” (125).

In contrast, Meridian chooses to work outside the bureaucratic main. She has a penchant for purpose and not distinction. Like Miss Winter, Meridian no longer needs to attach herself to the Movement to impact others. She moves away from a collective politics to leverage the institutional impact of Saxon College and the Atlanta Movement in demystifying the centers of power for the disenfranchised.

Opposite Miss Winter’s bureaucratic contestation, Anne-Marion has a militant political sensibility that includes the capitalist desire for “blacks to have the same opportunity to make as much money as the richest white people” (122). When Meridian falls ill, Anne-Marion severs ties with her and the Atlanta Movement, eventually taking up with a group called the New York Revolutionaries. In a meeting with the revolutionaries, Anne-Marion questions Meridian’s loyalty to nationalist principles (to kill for the movement), and Meridian never affirms that she will. Ultimately, Anne-Marion becomes a well-known poet and enjoys the luxuries that her writing affords. Evidently,
Anne-Marion abandons her militancy after becoming wealthy. The text’s silence on the revolutionary group suggests that they soon fizz out. Meridian’s politics depart from Anne-Marion’s in that she lacks material desire but engages in much questioning. When reflecting on her encounter with Anne-Marion’s acquaintances, she admits her inability to kill anyone and deems herself a failure in terms of Anne-Marion’s brand of revolutionary. Ten years later, Meridian retains the notes and letters she received from Anne-Marion which amount to “a litany of accusations” (9) that chide Meridian for being weak and lacking priorities. In considering her own priorities, Anne-Marion rejects the notion that she should leave a violent enough impact that would thrust the black poor into opportunity and declares, “I am not to belong to the future” (221). For Meridian, while others agonize over the toll the Movement has taken on them, she imagines that she will rise up singing the freedom songs that have held black communities together for generations. Even in this imagery, Meridian chooses to situate herself as the vessel through which the “songs of the people” will reanimate and restore the vitality of African American communities in postmodernity.

**The Man Question**

In *Meridian*, Walker uses Truman to comment on the individual activist’s shaky relationship to the Movement. Truman acts a counterpoint to characters like Meridian. Walker situates him in disparate environments: the South and the North, international sites like Paris, Saxon College, and the Atlanta and Mississippi Movements to highlight the ways Truman comes to critique larger society and his own place in the freedom struggle. In considering Truman Held, readers may pose a couple questions: How does he practice revolution? What are his politics, as it concerns his art? and How does the Movement influence his sense of individuality? Truman’s patriarchal status in the
Movement, while requiring work, affords him the spoils of bourgeois life. In addition, he has the benefit of a well-to-do black father. Jonathan Arac, in *Postmodernism and Politics*, weighs in on the possibility of developing intellectual and social practices that cut against the ideologies of bourgeois capitalism. According to Arac, “so long as bourgeois capital dominates workers over much of the planet […], and so long as that society continues to subordinate women, however good it may be, it is hardly irrelevant to the problems of the overwhelming majority who do not enjoy its benefits” (xxxvi).

Truman in his own right might view himself as progressive, in that his acculturation includes not only higher education (he attends R. Baron College) but also a commitment to activism. Unlike Meridian, whose revolutionary practice leads to withdrawal from bourgeois pleasures and fraternization, Truman takes advantage. For example, he has a short-lived and sporadic relationship with Meridian which ends in her pregnancy. She never tells Truman for fear that he might pity her. For Meridian, he “did not want a general beside him. He did not want a woman who tried, however encumbered by guilts and fears and remorse, to claim her own life” (112).

Labeled the “Conquering Prince” in one of the novel’s brief chapters, Truman’s hedonism impedes his activism. Preoccupied and philandering with three white exchange students, he no longer marches. In contrast to Meridian’s expectations of Truman, “[a]s a rule, he said, he didn’t march any more, ‘because what I believe cannot be placed on a placard’” (108). He justifies his indiscretion to Meridian by saying he does it for reasons of agency and because of the taboo ideas about interracial sex. When Truman finally confronts his demons, he works at a country club and subjects himself to the condescending remarks of wealthy whites. Truman complains that he
has “to just stand there and grin and bear it. I despise them,’ he said vehemently [...]” (117). Because he cannot enjoy the pleasures the country club members lord over him, Truman consumes himself with attaining dominance in the spaces of the Atlanta Movement and Saxon College.

Walker initiates a clash between the Movement and Truman due to his interracial relationship with a white Jewish exchange student, Lynne Rabinowitz. Truman ultimately marries her, and together they experience the clash of two cultural identities during their time in the South. The two settle in Mississippi, where for the first time he has to deal with backlash over his interracial relationship. Though phenotypically white, Lynne’s marriage to a black man and residence in the blackbelt South cordons her off from white society. After an incident in which fellow activist Tommy Odds because of racial backlash against the Movement, he and Truman argue when Tommy blames Lynne’s whiteness for the shooting. Yet after pondering Lynne’s culpability, Truman considers the way race has factored into the mistreatment of black individuals. For Truman, blacks bear the burden of their skin color and all its negative associations in the consciousness of mainstream America. Truman’s understanding contextualizes the shooting incident in the realm of the taboo of black and white relations and the purported protection of white womanhood by white men, which characterized racial terrorism throughout much of American history.

When serving in the Mississippi Movement, Truman and Lynne witness the closing of ranks and discrimination as the Movement grows. Truman notices the fear Lynne engenders among the young men at their first meeting. But despite her whiteness, the workers develop an affinity for her. However, “while this building of trust and mutual
liking was coming into being, the Movement itself was changing. Lynne was no longer welcome at any of the meetings. She was excluded from the marches. She was no longer allowed to write articles for the paper” (146). Just as the leadership marginalizes his wife, they ostracize him for his attachment to her and insist that he not discuss information with her. After this incident, Truman finds it impossible to operate in the leadership capacity to which he feels entitled nor can he any longer marshal the agendas of the Movement to his advantage as do his colleagues.

Unable to adopt a postmodern sense of the value of cultural difference, Truman estranges himself from Lynne and moves to New York. Ultimately, he retreats into the arts. He paints a mural of the struggle for the Atlanta Movement and then begins exclusively painting and sculpting figures of black women. Whereas he once decries the voluptuousness of black women’s bodies to Lynne, “in the end, he had stopped saying those things, at least out loud. It was as if the voluptuous black bodies, with breasts like melons and hair like a crown of thorns, reached out—creatures of his own creation—and silenced his tongue. They began to claim him” (184). Nonetheless, it does not follow that his art represents a kind of aesthetic recuperation of his earlier activism. In an encounter with Meridian during which time he chides her for thinking too much about the revolution, Truman asks

Do you realize no one is thinking about these things anymore? Revolution was the theme of the sixties: Medgar, Malcolm, George, Angela Davis, the Panthers, people blowing up buildings and each other. But all that is gone now. I am myself, making a statue of Crispus Attucks for the Bicentennial. We’re here to stay: the black and the poor, the Indian, and now all those illegal immigrants from the West Indies who adore America just the way it is. (206)

While Truman’s statue does not appear to have an overtly political purpose besides its historical reference, his statement captures the arrival of postmodernity in America,
which hinges on difference and militates against the denial of cultural pluralism. In addition, Meridian’s follow-up question “‘Then you think revolution, like everything else in America, was reduced to a fad?’” (206) speaks to the ability of American capitalism to fetishize even the most potent resistance struggles, a problematic feature of late capitalism. Though some spark remains, Truman has no desire to recover the freedom struggle but appears to have taken the capitalist route as has Anne-Marion. To move beyond the state of resignation in which he finds himself, he will need to champion his ambivalence over the same matters of revolution Meridian questions with obsessive regularity.

**Meridian’s Restless Questioning**

A debilitating sickness grips Meridian days before her graduation from Saxon College. Beginning with Meridian’s illness, the friendships she experiences precipitate her move toward an activism characterized by restless questioning and critical reflection. Her condition begins with blindness, loss of appetite, and then culminates in catatonic fainting spells. As her roommate (Anne-Marion) feeds her what little she will eat, Meridian “discover[s] herself becoming more and more full, with no appetite whatsoever. And, to her complete surprise and astonished joy, she began to experience ecstasy” (124). As it concerned the militant Anne-Marion however, Meridian’s condition functioned as an escape, not revolutionary confrontation. Thus, Anne-Marion soon abruptly leaves Meridian behind with the parting comment—

“‘Meridian, I can not afford to love you. Like the idea of suffering itself, you are

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6 *Postmodern Psychologies* draws a distinction between reflexivity and critical reflection, the former having more to do with a contemplative effort and interiority, and the latter “and active rebellious practice that drives the individual into action as he or she identifies the exercise of power that pins him or her into place and the fault lines for the production of space of resistance” (42).
obsolete” (131). Unlike Anne-Marion, Meridian embraces the inquisitive mindfulness that suffering brings. For example, when Truman visits Meridian in a small town in Alabama, he remarks on the kind of parallel course in her psyche: “Meridian, no matter what she was saying to you, and no matter what you were saying to her, seemed to be thinking of something else, another conversation perhaps, an earlier one, that continued on a parallel track. Or of a future one that was running an identical course. This was always true” (149). Meridian now exudes a restlessness, wherein “the future might be short, but memory was very long” (150). Meridian re-appropriates guilt of her life into a memory of life lessons by which she can guide herself through this turmoil.

Meridian retreats to a small village on the Georgia-Alabama state line years later and receives a visit from Lynne. Lynne, aware that Truman wants to rekindle a relationship with Meridian, speaks to the constricting thought processes of Movement activists. As Lynne puts it, “Black men and women are scared to death of each other, you know. Not your average black men and women, of course, who accept each other as only natural, but people like you and Truman who have to keep analyzing each other’s problems” (156). Moreover, Meridian and Lynne watch a T.V. program that featured a black man who after gaining the right to vote, did not know how he would earn money to buy food. His face allows Meridian and Lynne to question the minutiae of freedom available to the enfranchised poor in a nation deviously operated by wealthy individuals. The black man’s face mirrors their own contemplation: “It sought to understand, to encompass everything, and the struggle to live honorably and understand everything at the same time, to allow for every inconsistency in nature, every weird possibility and personality […]” (190). Walker novel suggests that the
Movement never accounts for this dynamic. In fact, in the same way that differences get flattened out in mainstream America, the bureaucracy of civil rights activism sought to sidestep in-group difference.

The novel concerns itself with the complexities of cultural connection. An interesting thing happens in the chapter entitled “Visits,” which initiates Meridian’s postmodern understanding of her moment. Meridian recalls an earlier time in which she embraces her illness as cultural currency: “she could summon whatever energy a task that had to be performed required, and like them [enslaved Africans], this ability seemed to her something her ancestors had passed on from the days of slavery when there had been no such thing as a sick slave, only a ‘malingering’ one” (154). Meridian takes a long walk and begins to question the idea of martyrdom. Interestingly enough, this walk precipitates a revision of the ancestral connection she appropriates:

[O]ne thought had preoccupied her mind: ‘The only new thing now,’ she had said to herself, mumbling it aloud, so that people turned to stare at her, ‘would be the refusal of Christ to accept crucifixion. King,’ she had said, turning down a muddylane, ‘should have refused. Malcolm, too should have refused. All those characters in all those novels that require death to end the book should refuse. All saints should walk away. Do their bit, then—just walk away. (162)

While Meridian knows this “new” thing has not yet materialized, she seeks something besides compulsory activism and imagines martyrs walking away alive after having done their part. When Lynne tells Meridian that she cannot change people in the South, Meridian rejoins, “But I can change,” [and] ‘I hope I will” (163). At this point, Meridian begins exercising her imagination and willing herself beyond her limitations.

Meridian’s rejoinder to Lynne comes in stark contrast to an earlier memory in which Meridian stands silent as a group of New York revolutionaries questions whether or not she will kill for the Movement. She has since come to believe “that this existence
extended beyond herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had
created them One Life” (220). In addition, she recalls standing underneath Saxon’s
campus tree and deciding she would kill for the cause of Christ. But wavering from her
promise, Meridian realizes that she cannot fathom even killing for the church. Moving
beyond righteous guardianship and the false urgings of rage, she searches for a new
definition of revolution: “I am a failure then, as the kind of revolutionary Anne-Marion
and her acquaintances were” (221). Meridian takes a posture that stares death in the
face.

Walker uses Meridian’s character to comment on the dynamics of spirituality and
postmodern political action. She easily identifies with her father’s spirituality, which
involved the singing of Christian hymns and Native American rituals, but she can neither
understand her mother’s unquestioned love for the Baptist church nor confess her belief
in God. Early on, Meridian experiences a tangible spiritual encounter at the Serpent’s
coil, named so after the shape of the Indian burial mounds on her father’s farm.
Meridian’s spiritual intoxication at the burial grounds stands opposite her zeal in the
arena of civil rights, the former a fleeting moment, the latter holds immediacy. However,
as an adult, Meridian begins irregularly attending a large Baptist church, featuring a
stained glass image of B.B. King, where the congregation sang dirge-like lyrics to
freedom songs. Meridian, who had always connected with freedom melodies, finds that
the songs have become much less revolutionary.

While the first preacher’s message rehearses the cadences of Martin Luther King’s
homilies to a tee and delivers a politically charged message, the congregation responds
dryly. To the older preacher, who introduced himself as the father of a civil rights martyr
picted on a large photograph in the church that lost a son to the Movement, the congregation buzzed. Meridian gathered from the ceremony that the church had embraced the sacrifice of this man’s son. Taking stock of her own sacrifice, Meridian “understood finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own” (219-220). Questioning the sermon’s effect, Meridian senses the congregation’s longing to share in the preacher’s loss and for the weaving of the revolutionary (invoked by the death the preacher often references) into the language and culture of the church, so as to stir up resistance in an institution becoming increasingly absent in political struggle. The red-eyed preacher only makes such appearances on the anniversary of his son’s death to remind the people of this great loss. Walker uses this scene to comment on the changing cultural sensibilities and the absence of revolutionary ire among black churches in the postmodern era. Because the church enjoys the gains of being able to elect black candidates, the young preacher who dons a neat black suit only imitates the language of revolutionary change in a stoic environment.

The novel paves the way for postmodern subjectivities by having Meridian gradually venture away from her parent’s belief systems into conceptions that suit her temperament. The Serpent’s coil spiritual experience—though key in her father’s embrace of the natural and supernatural—proves inaccessible to Meridian in light of both societal changes and her personal growth. However, Meridian equips gradients of Feather Mae’s (her paternal grandmother) spirituality and her mother’s social
proscriptions in her psychological burden-bearing approach to the revolution.
Ultimately, her questioning becomes spiritual in nature, a form of penitence.

Walker initiates Meridian’s postmodern turn through isolation and physical waning. The self-consciousness she experiences early on as a young wife and mother juts against her role as an activist and college graduate. Moreover, the novel surrounds Meridian in social, political, and racial upheavals that broaden her awareness and connect her with a number of flawed people. Alongside the narrative’s symbiotic attachments, Walker gives a portrait of how individuals might harness the sociopolitical apathy brought on by social movements and complicated in postmodernity to useful ends. Through Meridian, Walker imagines a revolutionary practice of restless questioning, as she constructs a mutable kind of activism for Meridian, which others can remake and revise for their own political approach.

A number of critical reflections on Meridian give attention to tradition, voice, and self-identity. Lynn Pifer in her essay “Coming to Voice in Alice Walker’s Meridian,” for instance, suggests that “when she [Meridian] finds that she cannot conform to authorized notions of appropriate speech, (public repentance, patriotic school speeches, and the like) her only rebellious recourse is silence” (77). As Pifer explains, Meridian works out the brunt of her personal struggle through non-conformity vis-à-vis the status quo for southern black women. Deborah McDowell argues that Walker transcends gender to explore the tensions of black womanhood and self-discovery.7 According to Donna Winchell, individuality gets repressed in the Civil Rights Movement’s group

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7 As McDowell explains, Walker explores “universal concerns about individual autonomy, self-reliance, and self-realization. Walker weaves these issues into her Bildungsroman in a way that allows the title character of Meridian to achieve wholeness in the face of fragmentation.
agenda. However, “Before Meridian can successfully define her role within the revolution, she must first successfully define herself […]” (59). We witness Meridian’s postmodern turn as she challenges the public policies of a small town. In effect, she comes to terms with her own “stubborn ambivalence”—her need to continually question. Having closed the public pool, the city officials precipitate the drowning of several small children that often wade in the town reservoir. As she leads the community in a protest march, which ends in her lying catatonic on the ground, Meridian bears the body of a five year old to city hall and “she had placed the child, whose body was beginning to decompose, beside his gavel” (209). In this instance, Meridian literally harnesses death via the child’s corpse and wrestles with death in her own paralyzed state.

At the beginning of the novel, we meet Meridian as she leads a demonstration in the small town of Chicokema, against the city’s segregationist policies. Black schoolchildren can only see the Marilene O’Shay circus exhibit on Thursdays. In protest, Meridian faces down a tank and a phalanx of police alone: “The town of Chicokema did indeed own a tank. It had been bought during the sixties when the townspeople who were white felt under attack from ‘outside agitators’—those members of the black community who thought equal rights for all should extend to blacks” (2). Several characteristics of postmodern culture make this demonstration unique: First, the “deep silence” of black onlookers instead of robust protest characterizes the march. Second, Meridian dons the appearance of a train conductor, as opposed to a charismatic civil rights leader. Lastly, we see small schoolchildren follow in line with Meridian, but they never burst into song, as a by-standing Truman anticipates. After the
children and some adults view the exhibit, the crowd disperses without much ado.

Meridian then almost methodically collapses and the townspeople cart her home.

In a departure from the Atlanta Movement, Meridian does not seek out volunteers. She neither counters Movement practices nor adopts them. When Truman remarks that she cannot expect the townspeople to take on a tank, Meridian responds with the town’s adage “[t]hat if somebody had to go it might as well be the person who’s ready” (11). Unlike Truman, Meridian cannot walk away from the Movement as if it never happened. She grieves for the victories and defeats through continued mindfulness. Not accepting the status quo of racial disparity or female domination, Meridian cultivates an individuality that meets the restless demands of revolution. Her revolutionary practices square off against conventionality, and she rejects futurity: “I was this, Meridian thought, I have not wanted to face, this that has caused me to suffer: I am not to belong to the future” (221).

In her interrogation of the Civil Rights Movement, Walker has Meridian reflect on the protracted freedom struggle itself, the endless battles, and the losses that attend it. Meridian takes a walk and ponders the thoughts of martyrs like Christ, King, and Malcolm. In a chapter entitled Free at Last, Walker recasts the funeral for Martin Luther King as an affair with the expected pomp and circumstance, but absent any grief. Meridian witnesses an odd distancing from death by the spectators who engage in loud conversation, laughter, and create “a feeling of relief in the air, of liberation, that was repulsive” (203). In a subsequent conversation with Truman, Meridian contemplates the revolution:
She could not help struggling with these questions. Just as Truman could not help thinking such struggle useless. In the end people did what they had to do to survive. They acquiesced, they rebelled, they sold out, they shot it out, or they simply drifted with the current of the time, whatever it was. And they didn’t endanger life and limb agonizing over what they would lose, which was what separated them from Meridian. (207)

This passage speaks to Meridian’s insight into the uselessness of acquiescence. In the postmodern era, Meridian refuses to settle for anything less than the giving of her full self to serving the downtrodden, realizing that another path would self-defeating. In opposition to postmodern conditions, Meridian continues to struggle with the novel’s most pressing questions. After isolating herself from the novels other characters, Walker highlights this agonizing need to question, which not only represents her political core but also animates her activism—a stubborn ambivalence that sustains her.

In explaining the protagonist’s conundrum, Stein remarks that “Meridian’s eponymous hero enacts this quest in her journey from adolescent unawareness to mature self-knowledge, from death to rebirth, from confrontations with revolutionary ardor to a spiritual vision” (130). Meridian dedicates herself to the revolution via her restlessness and questioning. The threat of “death” she squares off against manifests as not only physical via the violence enacted by brutal segregationists but also psychological in the demands she place upon herself. Ultimately, Meridian’s refusal to fit the molds others would cast her in (motherhood, wife, public speaker, violent revolutionary, and religious acolyte) brings about her liberation. Finally, Nadel suggests that Meridian does not lend itself to one reading, but cycles through several alternatives,
options, and points of view. Walker gives readers an exercise in the significance of meaning-making for communities and individuals alike.

In *Meridian*, Walker gives a portrait of the psychology behind Meridian’s revolutionary practice. Even as Meridian had canvassed voters diligently in the Movement, she struggled with questions about the revolution at large. This penchant for agonizing ultimately becomes her crucible, which she enters of her own accord. In the final chapter entitled “Release,” Meridian, cleansed of all sickness, returns to the world. Meridian “had discarded her cap, and the soft wool of her newly grown hair framed her thin, resolute face” (241). Truman says to Meridian: “‘Your ambivalence will always be deplored by people who consider themselves revolutionists, and your unorthodox behavior will cause traditionalists to gnash their teeth’ [...] To him, [those groups] were practically imaginary” (241). Meridian responds that she values her aloneness. She hugs him and exits quickly, leaving him to question. Truman understands that “It was his house now, after all. His cell” (242). To free himself of his burdens Truman must indulge them—he must take the weight of a cause on his shoulders and bear it for others. Dizzy, he climbs into Meridian’s sleeping bag (or symbolic crucible). Truman “had a vision of Anne-Marion herself arriving, lost, someday, at the door, which would remain open, and wondered if Meridian knew that the sentence of bearing the conflict in her own soul which she had imposed on herself—and lived through—must now be borne in terror by all the rest of them” (242). Ultimately, Truman must come full circle, from activism to hedonism to recuperating his role in the liberation of the downtrodden. Furthermore, having lost a wife and a
daughter, Truman will need to willingly bear the calamities in his own life to experience the psychological relief for which he yearns.

Walker’s *Meridian* leads her to acknowledge the pitfalls of civil rights activism, resulting from top-down politics and the postmodern conditions of social alienation and ambivalence. Through it all, the novel opposes an essentialist, one-size-fits-all approach. In addition, Walker observes the kind of restlessness and abstraction marking black experiences in terms of revolutionary agendas, education, and social mobility. Lastly, *Meridian* looks at an individual’s own sense of revolution—situating this issue around the horizon of resistance movements. Furthermore, Walker considers the psychological effect of civil rights movements on individuals that become jaded, though their political fire remains.

In understanding Walker’s entire oeuvre, my perspective encourages critics to explore the contribution to postmodernism within Walker’s novels. Among other things, this chapter suggests that taking a look at the barriers to individuality erected during the civil rights revolution can provide insight into the fragmented conditions of black life in the postmodern era. If the absence of such an impactful movement represents a cessation of or redirection of those energies, then why do we see the struggle played out on so many fronts by middle and working class blacks. In short, the psychological angst and almost obsessive will to struggle against oppression rests not with the auspices of political or cultural organizations but gets shouldered by everyday young dissidents. Ultimately, I encourage the exploration of the detriments and benefits of group consciousness and its absorption into the hegemonic landscape. Critics might consider the struggle for autonomy, traversing both cultural and institutional terrains.
The hope for a more nuanced understanding of what signals a postmodern moment among marginalized groups lies in looking at the functionality of individuals in contemporary contexts. This chapter hopes to reconfigure postmodernism by including the works of Alice Walker as insight into the rarely illustrated postmodern crises facing African Americans.
James Smethurst’s essay “The Black Arts Movement” (2010) accounts for the artistic, cultural, social, and political legacy of the Black Arts Era and its lasting influence on American culture. Smethurst suggests that the era changed the creation and reception of artistic endeavors and that it produced conflicting tenets, which for better or worse, treated culture seriously. Commenting on the debates among artists and activists, Smethurst remarks, “[o]ne thing that bound Black Arts and Black Power together was that their ideas and even organization work moved through shared institutional spaces” (304). For instance, “activists who were also artists would travel to various cities to participate in some political event or activity and would also find the time to do some cultural work (e.g., a poetry reading, the staging of a play, and so on).” Doing culture work (making cultural production accessible) within urban sites, social organizations, and durable institutions reclaims those spaces for people languishing in the monotony of social climbing. With this observation, Smethurst hones in on the energy behind a key move in 1970s African American literature toward working culture in advantageous ways for black communities. Literary culture workers have functioned to support, criticize, and educate emerging artists and the general populace by creating an aesthetic infrastructure, whose insight would make postmodern cultural difference more approachable.

Chapter three looks at the African American culture work narrative and how it anticipates the cultural fluidity one needs in a heterogeneous postmodern society. As John Oliver Killens’s *The Cotillion* demonstrates, the culture work narrative portrays an
effective use of culture—as unabashed expressions, which emerge out of shared practice, and stir up emotions and values, not partisanship. Inasmuch as *The Cotillion*, which as the title suggests, riffs satirically on a longstanding southern tradition, Killens not only portrays the clash between traditions held among particular racial races and classes but also creates an environment in which exclusive traditions\(^1\) jar with expansive notions of difference.

**Killens’s Polemical Influence**

Killens’s renown as a literary activist takes shape in the research of writers like Keith Gilyard, Addison Gayle, Jr., James Smethurst, and Lisa McGill. Shaped by the political and cultural consciousness of black rights supporters and nationalism during the 1950s, Killens’s political activism grew out of the need for polemical writing. In *The Indignant Generation*, Lawrence Jackson talks about Killens’s sociopolitical grooming and artistic ties. While he wanted to compose a politically engaged black subjectivity, Killens found multiple aesthetic conventions to analyze the black experience: the use of a satirical mode and fluidity in narrative voice; attention to black cultural heritage, community based lexicons, and vernacular; commentary on the cultivation of a black psyche; and the influence of televisual reflection on African American identity politics.\(^2\)

*Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left* looks at how Killens organized numerous conferences during the 60s for the purpose of compelling young writers to “join a

\(^1\) Andreas Huyssen in “The Search for Tradition: Avant-garde and postmodernism in the 1970s” paints a picture of 1970s culture in the United States as fighting “tradition, and this revolt took place at a time of political and social turmoil” (223).

\(^2\) See Daryl Dickson-Carr’s *African American Satire* (143-146); William L. Van Deburg’s *New Day in Babylon* (96, 273), Alan Wald’s *Trinity of Passion: The literary Left* (62); and Sashas Torres’ *Living Color: Race and Television in the United States* (70).
crusade to decolonize the minds of black people” (62). Joyce Ann Joyce recalls a 1966 writer’s conference during which Killens and others articulated artistic issues fundamental in today’s understandings of the African American literary canon. Moreover, *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* dedicated its 2004 issue to Killens for influencing upcoming generations to use writing to promote black cultural and political agendas.

Killens initiated his political and artistic foray when his first novel *Youngblood* grabbed the attention of readers and critics alike for its emphasis on unionism among black and white workers in the South. However, his novels *And Then We Heard Thunder* and *The Cotillion* were each nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. *And Then We Heard Thunder* examines racism abroad and situates black racial reality within a global context. However, it does not feature the kind of in-group cultural tension that is germane to my analysis. I perform a close reading of *The Cotillion* because of its critical focus on class—exclusionary practices among the black elite and Afrocentric influence among black working classes—and the politics of cultural nationalism.

I argue that Killens takes a vantage on the era of Black Nationalism that not only reads the divisions between activists, artists, elites, etc. into the ideology but also looks at the protections of tradition in each arena, which only lets up in shared spaces. Killens creates a context that not only resists consensus but also resists the collapsing of particularity among black experiences. Capturing this reality, Killens’s *The Cotillion* does not privilege or reinstall one tradition over another, but makes identity flexible and imagines multiple viewpoints in postmodern urban space.
A Work of Culture

James Emanuel’s 1971 essay “Blackness Can: A Quest for Aesthetics” discusses the burden that authors have in helping black America discover and preserve its literature despite the hostility in predominantly white publishing companies. In his essay, Emanuel outlines the cause for which authors themselves have become culture workers and have deployed characterizations of culture workers in their fiction. Writers like Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, and Sam Greenlee present the culture work narrative in multiple ways. Whether in themes that push against Western monocultural impulses, circulate cultural knowledge and an Afrocentric ethos, or cultivate a political black consciousness within the working class divides, these authors speak to the necessity of utilizing culture in a way that socializes others to different experiences. African American literary culture, having gained momentum from reform movements within the academy and abroad cannot loosen its grasp on a conflicting cultural and social reality. That said, the culture work narrative relishes the circulation of multiple traditions but never achieves a consensus of ideas nor settles for agree-to-disagree logic. Instead, it rejects such false dichotomizing of human experience for the voicing of multiple cultural expressions.

Ideas about culture make their way into African American literature because they abound in debates over education. Sociologist Amy Binder in “Friend and Foe: Boundary Work and Collective Identity” looks at divisions created among black activists that “go cultural” in the 1990s in order “to press for changes in their own and the majority population’s acknowledgment of their contributions to world and national history” (222). Binder examines the different ways Afrocentrists and Multiculturalists, as distinct racial projects, comprehend the cultural terrain and work to change traditional
approaches to education. Yet they constantly consider each other’s programs suspect and thereby cement separation among these schools of thought. To this point, Binder references Manning Marable’s and Leith Mullings’s essay “The Divided Mind of Black America.” The authors typologize racial identity projects that have their roots in 1960s and 70s social issues. They talk about the separatist and inclusionist perspectives espoused by Black Nationalism and Post-Civil Rights liberalism, respectively, in which black intellectuals choose to work within the sphere of their own ideologies and institutions and to double down on their politics. Liberating culture itself in any project can enable the articulation of other valuable ways of knowing.

The literary portrayal of culture work is didactic in its own right, but it does not depend on a meeting of the minds. Instead, it welcomes and builds upon what Smethurst refers to as “conflicting tendencies” (303). Black writers that demonstrate this narrative move, portray the difficulties associated with establishing a multivalent concept about the use of culture in institutional and social spaces. As this kind of literature elevates cultural production, tradition, etc. to impact urban life, it bridges different social realities.

The culture work narrative may descend from protest literature that once dominated the African American literary canon. In the mid-twentieth century, protest literature aimed at appraising the American social scene from the perspective of disadvantaged blacks. Treated as second-class citizens, vast cities of the North best captured the vise, which bespoke opportunity but shunted ambitious blacks into drudgery. While the Post-Civil Rights Era brings about opportunity, writers have had to challenge the lingering cultural inferiority. The culture work narrative redresses the
devaluation of black cultural experiences by enabling several traditions to flourish. Lastly, the culture work narrative does seek reconciliation with some authentic black culture but instead contends for the flourishing of different social experiences.

One current that runs through education reform movements and social movements alike is the particularity of experience over common culture. Writing about the post-civil rights era, Marable’s *Beyond Black and White* (1995) remarks that we “cannot really speak about a ‘common racial experience’ which parallels the universal opposition blacks felt when confronted by legal racial segregation. Moreover, contemporary black experience can no longer be defined by a single set of socioeconomic, political and/or cultural characteristics” (128). Marable’s comments go to the heart of rifts around class and culture within black communities. He speaks to the nuanced reality taken up at the height of Black Nationalism and scrutinized in African American Studies departments since the 1970s. Amy Ongiri’s *Spectacular Blackness* points out that the “Black Arts Movement began its negotiations around class, inclusion, and cultural production precisely when changes created by the Civil Rights Movement and the end of legalized segregation fostered opportunities for economic advancement and inclusion” (103). The negotiations made by novelists during the era also include correctives for culturally disinvested blacks who reject an African heritage for Euro-American traditions. Such correctives show up in fiction and militate against the generalization of African American identity.

Among newly realized black experiences in the 1960s, socioeconomic difference took shape as class conflict. An important issue, class encompasses one’s assumptions about and tendency toward certain sets of behaviors and practices. A
number of writers during the late 1960s accounted for intraracial class tensions. Determining that studying the plane of class relations would yield an understanding of African American socialization, *The Cotillion* articulates what Linda Hutcheon in the *A Poetics of Postmodernism* describes as “differences that go beyond class; differences that challenge from within the possibility of mastery, objectivity, impersonality […]” (69).

In defining difference, Killens’ *novel* evidences Hutcheon’s sense that the complexities of class are engulfed in crisis and rife with meaning in the postmodern era.

As the concept of Black Nationalism, which argued for cultural self-determination, emanated from black scholars and intellectuals during the 1960s, a number of offshoots like Black Arts Movement and Black Power culture developed. Critics ascribe to these collectives the ripple effect recognizable in the postmodern era. However, Ongiri makes the case that “the very contradictions inherent in Black radical notions […] critically formed the ways in which we continue to understand Black identity, Black community, and Black cultural production” (27). For Ongiri, the contemporary implications of the nationalist legacy can be readily seen in its impact on American media and visual culture. In her assessment, the oppositional creativity practiced by artists led to the featuring of more African Americans in popular culture.

Opposite the study of black cultural politics, Madhu Dubey analyzes literary culture in *Black Literary Postmodernism*. Her reinterpretation of Black Nationalism characterizes the cultural nationalist exposure of “the spurious universalism of modern Western humanism” as postmodernist (33). Still, the acknowledgement of wholesale exclusion does not bring about the valuation of black America. The impetus behind dispelling Western universality among writers like John Oliver Killens included a belief
that the recognition of a common heritage and of socially specific experience could invigorate the cultural consciousness of African Americans grasping for identification within the working class or middle class.

Radical social politics undergirds the culture work narrative. Remarking on the topical vision for the novel, Killens explains, “Well, first of all, the history of *The Cotillion* was something that had been going around in my head for some time, how to satirize what I deem to be the folly of black middle-class imitators of the white people who oppress them” (Lehman 86). Killens argues that affirming one’s own sense of racial identity (developing a black psyche) challenges sentiments of cultural inferiority. In effect, those who would embrace their individuality must reject essentialist notions of respectability, avoiding as they do the pitfalls of mistaking imitation for cultural enlightenment. Because of these factors, Killens observes, some blacks demonstrate unawareness of their own cultural agency. As he puts it, “I think they think that they are for the uplifting of the race with these cotillions. That’s because their values are completely white. What is white is right. What is black is negative. Some of them, I think, when they read [*The Cotillion*] were deeply hurt. But I think it made some of them think” (86). Written in 1972 and set in Harlem, *The Cotillion* purposely engages insular ideas about black culture that abound even in the midst of a range of black experiences. Awareness of the various identities that surround, engulf, and make up the modalities of blackness represents not only a prime concern for Killens but also the most important step toward acknowledging self-definable ways of being.

Much current reassessment of Nationalism’s legacy centers on its installation of a masculine, patriarchal prescription in families and communities. Dubey takes up this
issue in *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*. While critiquing the ways 1970s nationalist discourse marginalized black women, she uses the term “oppositional unity” (1) to highlight the subsequent ways black women novelists interrogated the discourse. Dubey rejects the situating of black women’s fiction into the space of some of the same universalizing pretexts artists have challenged. Culture workers like Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones produced novels that disrupted constricting models of black identity and created complex female subjects. The value of the culture work narrative rests in its suspicion of prescriptions, which pass themselves off as broad experiences.

**Postmodernity and Class Difference**

A summary of *The Cotillion*’s plot looks at the lives of the Lovejoy family (Matthew, Daphne, and Yoruba), which resides in Harlem, and Ben Ali Lumumba, an erstwhile neighbor. Each character goes through a number of changes to achieve a suitable social identification. Set in the late 1960s during the height of Black Nationalism, the varying performances that come out of this flowering of Afrocentricity create a backdrop rife in the cultural capital of black pride. Matthew, a rural man from Georgia comes to Harlem in 1928, and, believing himself business savvy, pursues success as an entrepreneur. He marries Daphne Braithwaite, a semi-aristocratic beauty from Barbados, who cherishes her Scottish heritage and, soon after migrating to New York, decides against domestic work. Daphne watches their daughter Yoruba mature and develop what she labels “unrefined” ideals and wants to usher her into high society. As a result, the Lovejoy family splinters, undergoes a consciousness-raising transformation, and emerges more socially heterogeneous. Amid the clamor, Ben Ali Lumumba, a self-proclaimed citizen of the world, enters Yoruba’s life as a love interest. He embodies black cultural nationalism. The two lovers challenge the parochial ideas
of decorum and tradition held by Daphne and the Femmes Fatales, a social organization composed of elite black women.

In Cornel West’s 1990 essay “The New Culture Politics of Difference” he critiques the legacy of Black Nationalism as negating difference for a repressive acknowledgment of shared heritage. Nonetheless, West identifies a contemporary culture worker that carries on the legacy of nationalism’s dissenting struggle, in which writers like Killens begin an interrogation of the “profoundly hybrid character” of blackness, race, and nationality (7). Embedded in The Cotillion are instances of the postmodern articulations that undergird West’s prospective vision for a redefining of cultural ideology in the American social fabric. Today’s culture workers in literature, popular culture, etc., critique modern black strategies of resistance and have begun an analysis of identity formation in the postmodern era.

Killens’s vision of the postmodern condition revolves around the weathering away of boundaries between cultural institutions, which share a common heritage. He exposes an insidious class consciousness among the black middle class during the late 1960s. In exploring the complexities of African American class mobility, he illuminates the extent to which some aspire to the prescriptive politics of particular institutions. For example, in The Cotillion, the Femmes Fatales, the social club Daphne hopes to join, is an exclusive club that welcomes only middle class individuals while inviting the children of working class blacks like Yoruba for the sake of reforming them. Yet this encounter eventually infuses difference into the organization. Individuals fend off exclusion with the insistent spreading of their cultural values as opposed to retreating into like-minded spaces. Indeed, postmodernity problematizes rigid distinctions made by entities like the
Femmes Fatales. Even in the novel’s late 1960s setting, readers see distinct black experiences flourish in close proximity to one another.

Some of the most useful studies of Killens’s interrogation of intraracial class tension, I think, focus on satire and nationalism. Darryl Dickson-Carr, emphasizing the text’s satirical design, for example, argues that “Killens’s explicit project of trying to find a common ground on which the different intraracial classes can meet is remarkably rare, if not unique” (143). Dickson-Carr suggests that Killens satirizes “tensions that should be familiar to those readers who have witnessed the absurdities of class conflict” (144). Observing the satirical nationalist self-display in *The Cotillion*, Rolland Murray remarks that it “[r]egister[s] the exalted status of language in nationalist ideology at the same time that it undoes the instrumental deployment of that speech […]” (156). For purposes of their arguments, Dickson-Carr and Murray do not delve into Killens concern for a politics of difference, which paves the way for postmodern social relations between family, cultural ties, and social organizations.

*The Cotillion* tasks Yoruba and Lumumba with assimilating multiple subjectivities so that they can appear innocuous while permeating (and appropriating different identities to permeate) numerous spaces, slipping through the cracks contemporary society provides via social mobility. Killens articulates a dilemma in which African Americans found themselves in the era of Black Nationalism, which developed as a result of the entrance of numerous blacks into middle-class arrangements of status and the surge of black pride among the working-class. Lastly, Yoruba and Lumumba concern themselves with demonstrating the flexibility that will be necessary to navigate the most pedigreed clubs. While doing so, their actions suggest that the socioeconomic
and heterogeneous conditions of postmodernity make difference vibrant enough that social bias cannot quell it.

**Black Nationalist Culture and the “Real” Yoruba**

Historically, Killens invokes Black Nationalist movements of the late 1960s in *The Cotillion*. This moment witnessed the flourishing of African American cultural identities. Whereas the literature of his contemporaries honed in on social protest, avant-gardism, and quest narratives, Killens’s satire launches critiques aimed at the incipient black bourgeoisie. The novels of satirists like Ishmael Reed take a more global approach in terms of contrasting eastern belief systems with monoculturalism. Reed’s fiction does not so much concern itself with the everyday social dynamics of black communities.³

*The Cotillion* portrays black cultural nationalism as it engulfs Harlem. First, the novel credits black arts poetry and militant rhetoric with igniting black consciousness in Yoruba. Some of this performativity serves as entertainment. For example, Yoruba muses at the public rantings of Billy “Bad Mouth” Williams, a self-styled nationalist leader that makes crowds laugh at his signifying. Yet he fails at articulating redemptive strategies for economically disenfranchised blacks. However, nationalist rhetoric cultivates in her a respect for the critiques of racism, hedonism, and consumerism embedded in the nationalist poetry.

³ In her essay “The Chitlin Circuit: On Black Community,” bell hooks imagines a way of recovering community amid “a sense of extreme fragmentation and alienation” (38) characterizing a postmodern world. Hooks opposes embracing a neonationalism for a “bonding that is rooted in relational love” (37). According to hooks, we actualize this relational love in light of the presence of multiple black experiences, and we “can begin to build anew black communal feelings and black community by returning to the practice of acknowledging one another in daily life” (39). As hooks would have us do with other black experiences, she cherishes the epistemologies of agrarian culture—in opposition to dismissive postmodernist critiques of culture without essentializing it.
Black cultural nationalism maintains its appeal because it attaches to cultural spaces. As Yoruba strolls through Harlem, she encounters throngs of counterculture groups and hears the melodies of jukeboxes blasting the jazz classics of artists wailing freedom sounds. From there, the novel transplants readers to the Café Uptown Society, where the rhythms and cadences mesmerize her. Readers take in the sights and sounds of the Way-Out Restaurant, a mix of restaurant, cabaret, and coffeehouse borne out of the sexual revolution. These spaces give voice to working-class issues of low-wage labor and joblessness and to nationalist concerns with black enterprise and racial uplift. However, *The Cotillion* avoids linking the two. It renders the experiences of cultural nationalism and working-class ideology mutually exclusive. Early on, this becomes a textual strategy for the later entwining of these two groups.

Killens does not portray cultural nationalist and working-class experience (though they cope with the same conditions) as always-already congruent in postmodern society. In fact, *The Cotillion* projects social spaces familiar to Lumumba as disparate from the sites Matt frequents, and vice versa. The novel achieves this through its emphasis on in-group practices. For example, it suggests that the Kool Krazy Kats not only speaks an inscrutable language but also engages in violent action: The “KKK got themselves together and rapped and blew each other’s minds, and some say they blew other things and sundry” (55). Similarly, at the Way-Out Restaurant, Yoruba witnesses handshakes described as a “combination of hand-grip, Indian-wrestle, chest-pounding, hand-grip, again, finger snapping.” That the greetings vary by neighborhoods, cities, and states, makes their appropriation nearly impossible.
The protagonist Yoruba Evelyn Lovejoy comes of age and seeks an identity in *The Cotillion*. Observing the multiple identities around her in Harlem, she does not relinquish her past or fashion an insular way of life, but absorbs the plurality of culture around her. While walking through Manhattan, “[a]ll of the memories that came back to her now from that faraway age were good times to her” (13). Thought fond of her past, Yoruba neither overemphasizes it nor puts stock in some highfalutin future. She very much lives in the moment: “she could not turn back the clock. She never really wanted to” (17). Maturing in a class-diverse environment, Yoruba sees herself as beset by an array of identities. She not only agrees to participate in the year’s Grand Cotillion—appeasing her mother who wants her to “debut”—but also submits to the bourgeois tutelage of the Femme Fatales, an elite black women’s organization catering to the doyennes of high society. However, like the plastic that adorns the furniture in one of the Femme Fatales’ household, she must navigate the artificialities that surround her. Yoruba must adopt an identity that does not constrain her but enables the negotiation of two key positions: debutante-in-training and Afrocentric black woman.

In *The Cotillion*, intraracial difference ignites a confrontation between nationalism and discourses of respectability and assimilation. Both sides take pride in their traditions. However, similar to the emergence of Black Greek letter fraternities and sororities, the Femmes Fatales appropriates the ideology of elite white organizations.

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4 Chantal Mouffe highlights the ideological politics operative in the concept of tradition in the postmodern era: “Tradition allows us to think our own insertion into historicity, the fact that we are constructed as subjects through a series of already existing discourses, and that it is through this tradition which forms us that the world is given to us and all political action made possible” (“Radical Democracy” 39).

5 For a history of the social hierarchy surrounding black elites and their emerging social organizations such as Jack and Jills, cotillions, and Black Greek-letter organizations see Our Kind of People: Inside Black America’s Upper Class.
While Killens celebrates the boundary-crossing potential of nationalist performativity (as he satirizes it), he scrutinizes the self-aggrandizing efforts toward social climbing.

Yoruba does not embrace the concept of a black respectability attained through wealth or the emulation of whiteness. She does however play around with the notion of accessing her “real” self. “Deconstructing the ‘real me’” for Angela McRobbie in *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* “has involved showing [this process] to be a social and political requirement, a form of enforcement, a means of regulating legitimate ways of being […]” (70). The process to which McRobbie alludes requires that Yoruba assert her individuality: “How do you tell your mother you don’t want to be a lady? That you would rather be a good Black woman? […] Sometimes she felt like shouting: “Will the real Yoruba Evelyn step forward please. And assert yourself” (46)? At this point, she sees herself as powerless to shape her own destiny. In addition, Yoruba’s self-concept involves the merging of two distinct schools of thought. First, she embraces the Afrocentric stylizations that characterize Harlem’s cultural nationalism. While distance from her usual environs others Yoruba, she equips a working-class identity in the midst of the highfalutin ways of Brooklyn high society debutantes and the Femme Fatales’ vision of a Grand Cotillion that will civilize the “culturally deprived.”

**Class Consciousness and Religion**

Killens’s sense of class division resonates with the way Matthew and Daphne Lovejoy associate themselves with respective classes. When Matthew Lovejoy marries Daphne Braithwaite and settles down in Harlem, he becomes an entrepreneur. The Stock Market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression see to it that his businesses do not take root and grow into a fortune. As a result, Matt clinches his blackness as a source of great pride and worth and joins the nationalist and working-class movements
of Harlem. He spans the gamut of movements for global black solidarity by “march[ing] behind every Black man who ever raised his voice in Harlem, including Garvey, Powell, Ben Davis, Paul Robeson, and very very naturally Brother Malcolm” (31). Working as a Penn Station redcap, Matt situates himself among the working class.

Matt’s anti-upper class sentiments taint his and Daphne’s interactions. For Daphne, he fixates on his blackness and on living a common life. Speaking as a foil for Killens, Matt critiques of the cotillion routinely agitate Daphne: “That’s the whole trouble with you colored peoples imitating white folks. You try to do everything they do, without knowing how come they doing what they doing in the first place, or the second place, either one” (125). However, Matt’s quips do not deter Daphne. As a young Caribbean beauty (reputedly sacrificing her birthright by coming to America and marrying Matt), Daphne zeroes in on changing her family’s class status. She claims a right to the bourgeoisie because she descends from the Braithwaites—“first family coloreds” in Barbados.

_The Cotillion’s_ portrayal of the Brooklyn Memorial Episcopal Cathedral as disconnected from black life, denies Yoruba a religious option suitable to her cultural identity. The Brooklyn Memorial Episcopal Cathedral, once an all-white church in the exclusive Crown Heights district, undergoes a drastic change in becoming an all-black congregation. The parishioner Father Madison Mayfair succeeds Father Thatcher, who, in the wake of the full-scale retreat of white congregants, invited black parishioners to join. When Yoruba and Matt accompany Daphne on Sundays, she sees them as occupying a state of “complacent ignorance,” regarding her efforts to expose them to middle class manners. Daphne relishes taking Matt and Daphne there every Sunday.
Though she appropriates black middle class traditions, her actions ascribe a privilege to white religious traditions. We learn that the church’s prior membership leaves for racial reasons, “as the onward Christian soldiers sought the Blessed Saviour in less dark, more illumined quarters. Preferring not to brighten the corner where they were, as they were called upon to do by the blessed Vicar” (35). Nonetheless, Daphne makes a connection between associating with the middle class, absorbing their bourgeois tendencies, and attaining prestige for her family.

The Brooklyn Memorial Episcopal Cathedral, in contrast to cultural nationalism, offers only a one-dimensional experience and marginalizes of black conceptions of spirituality. To Daphne’s logic, she sees Mayfair as a self-sacrificing Christ figure because he follows suit with the former pastor in permitting black attendance. Daphne scolds Matt, “The dear Vicar is giving up his entire career as a white man, just to give us an integrated experience. He’s the only white person left in the entire congregation. You should get down on your Black knees and thank God for progressive men like Father Mayfair” (36). Ironically, Father Mayfair’s silence in the text suggests that while he takes up the previous Vicar’s integrationist stance, he makes no turn toward incorporating black spiritual traditions; even more so, the absence of white congregants diminishes the integrative experience. Lastly, divorced from any movement that attaches to the lived reality of black working class or middle class life, Mayfair’s democratic gesture falls flat. Killens does not present Mayfair as an agent of change in

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6 As it concerns Black church politics, Charles Eric Lincoln’s and Lawrence H. Mamiya’s 1990 study The Black Church in the African American Experience remarks on a political proposition: “As the primary social and cultural institution, the Black Church is deeply embedded in black culture in general so that the sphere of politics in the African American community cannot be easily separated from it” (234).
black communities but as an emissary of white paternalism. Matt deems the black congregants complicit: “‘All them black damn sheep with a white damn shepherd.’ […] Calling a white man Father in these days and times” (36). Indeed, Mayfair’s pastoring implies a non sequitur: it does not follow that the church’s previous integration efforts will grant blacks access to meaningful racial diversity or bring about any social parity with whites.

**Gender and Its Psychological Ramifications**

In *The Cotillion* women occupy an adored status in terms of the nationalist rhetoric on embracing black women as descendants of African queens. This tenet contrasts the mainstream devaluation of black women, which favors elevating white womanhood. While in different contexts, Daphne and Yoruba experience similar struggles because of their gender. The narrator underscores the paternalist logic concerning black women in the novel early on in a description of Yoruba as “[p]ure, beautiful, untampered-by-the-white-man Yoruba” (1). Yoruba occupies this position in a nationalist milieu that declares, “*Keep the Hunkie’s eyes off our Beautiful Black women!*”(7). Yet this logic that sees women as defenseless objects in need of protection also embraces the patriarchal sway of white masculinity.

In two particular instances, Yoruba and Daphne combat white masculine privilege. On the one hand, Yoruba fends off her dance instructor’s assumptions about the sexual vigor of black women. On the other hand, Daphne casts off the psychological burden of her white father’s sexual misconduct. First, the attempt to exploit women for sexual agendas figures into Yoruba’s experience with her queer dance instructor, Mr. Phil Potts. His stereotypical assumptions lead him to ascribe to Yoruba a kind of generative sexual power, and then to attempt to consume this energy for his own purpose. Potts
begs that Yoruba save him from sexual ambivalence by giving having sex with him: “I can be a man! I know I can, and only you can help me find the way [....] We are both unloved!” The passage implies that by some illogic Yoruba’s “Black beauty” will propel him into heteronormativity because she too belongs to a marginalized group. Undoubtedly, Potts has not only witnessed the subordination of his sexuality in mainstream society but also the subordination of his socioeconomic status as a male dance instructor hired by the Femmes Fatales. In addition, he fancies himself an expert on the color question and on attractions between blacks and whites. This situation, though rendered satirically by Killens, enacts what Philip Brian Harper describes as a “meeting of the marginals.”

After Yoruba escapes Potts’s clutches, the novel goes silent on him. Though society denies Potts masculine privilege on several levels, he finds a way to reduce Yoruba to a mere gateway to his own ascendance. While the novel paints Potts as a satirical character, the preoccupation with heteronormative masculinity and his association of it with sexual prowess victimizes him. Just as he embraces this problematic conception, he also puts stock in the outmoded conception of black womanhood as a source of transformative capabilities. Fortunately, Yoruba will wade through wrongheaded assumptions and come to redefine conceptions of black womanhood for herself, ways that move beyond exploitation into autonomy.

Psychological victimization emerges in Daphne’s unquestioned admiration for her white father and disregard for her black mother. In the fondest memory, Daphne

7 The term Harper uses in Framing the Margins to represent the possibilities for discordances and the balances between two socially marginal individuals.
declares, “After Angus Braithwaite was created, my dears, they threw away the mold’” (39), yet she believes “her mother didn’t understand the limitations of a concubine’s prerogatives. In a word, she was a sassy Black woman, gave ol’ masser word for word” (38). If Daphne privileges her father’s promiscuous legacy of having eleven black concubines and fathering two or three children by each over the implied autonomy behind her mother’s exit, then that explains why she despises the indefatigable quality of working-class culture. Daphne’s has a culturally fragmented psyche. As Daphne later confesses, “My mother and her folks was the humble people. Wherever my white father walked, Black men bowed and scraped, so I despised the Black in me” (202). This window into Daphne’s past links the damage done to her sense of self with her overvaluation of whiteness—a tendency that also shows up in the ranks of the Femmes Fatales. Daphne’s character and the Femmes Fatales respectively illustrates the ways this dilemma functions as more than an isolated quirk but as a comment on the sentiments of racial inferiority in black social institutions.

**Lumumba’s Trailblazing**

In working class spaces and in nationalist sites, *The Cotillion* paves the way for Lumumba (formerly Ernest Walter Billings, Yoruba’s childhood playmate), and the boundary-crossing, class-bridging strategies he utilizes. He exemplifies a postmodern conception of socialization for Yoruba, her family, and the Femmes Fatales. To understand Lumumba’s ideological and cultural repertoire, I ask basic questions: What kind of subject is Lumumba? What are compelling examples of his social functionality? What approach to class and tradition does he embody? How does he differ from other characters? How, then, do other characters respond to his instincts? Commenting on the function of postmodernist art, Gerald Graff, in “The Myth of the Postmodernist
"Breakthrough" suggests that the dissolution of ego-boundaries dismantles identity and acts as a prelude to consciousness expansion (227). As Graff explains, the Western ego represents a rational mode of consciousness opposed to conceptions of difference. Lumumba perceives boundaries in a unique way. He has an instinctive ethos when it comes to class and culture. Moreover, Lumumba improvises when faced with difference; therefore, class distinctions in the black communities do not sway him. Lastly, his character thwarts both bourgeois vanity and nationalist proscriptions.

Lumumba blazes the trail of postmodern fusion. Acting as code-switching purveyor of sorts, he possesses the skill set for adapting to traditions while infusing his own assumptions within those traditions. A poet, artist, and seaman, Lumumba proves to have a cosmopolitan disposition. He speaks of Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America, describing himself as a world traveler on a journey to galvanize the black diaspora. The trailblazer facilitates the convergence of diverse communities. At moments when institutions close ranks along the lines of difference, as do the class-stratified Femmes Fatales, the trailblazer must first disrupt group politics. He does so by socializing in different spaces (banquets, parties, cotillions, etc.) in the novel, and using those spaces as a palimpsest upon which he leave his own idiosyncrasies. Ultimately, Lumumba demystifies class particularity and guides Yoruba in bringing her ideas of beauty, culture, to Grand Cotillion.

First, Lumumba nurtures Yoruba’s sense of self. As they reunite, he restores her faith in the childhood memories that she often recalls in joyful reverie. Through his glibness, Lumumba legitimates her ambitions: “all her inhibitions, even those Lady Daphne instilled, gone with the selfhood-ship of words […]” (91). Second, he
challenges Yoruba with overcoming the pressure of her mother’s bourgeois ideals. He tells her that the Femmes Fatales act as unaware agents of black cultural oppression in their overemphasis on pedigree. Finally, Lumumba acts in solidarity with Yoruba, humoring her mother’s bourgeois antics and escorting her to the cotillion.

Lumumba permeates multiple constituencies. Passing through the circuits of disparate lived experiences (through the boroughs of New York and abroad), Lumumba’s adaptive posture is an affront to modern conceptions, which limit an individual’s capacity for the mastery of many epistemologies. Lumumba best embodies Susan Lundquist’s description of a trickster figure, as “a being who continually exposes those behaviors and thinking processes that have been marginalized. [The t]rickster is continually deconstructing ideologies and calling attention to foolish human behavior” (89). His social indulgence bridges cultural divides, though he does so to the marrying of his own sociocultural sensibilities with others’. He occupies what Linda Hutcheon terms the inside-outsider position in which one rejects a totalizing tradition while simultaneously participating in it.

To influence organizations like the Femmes Fatales, Lumumba as inside-outsider can either support the dominant ideology or undermine the systems at play. As such, he bridges the gap between cultural, social, and class boundaries, demonstrating to Yoruba the viability of his efforts. Though he joins Yoruba in her upper class foray, Lumumba rebuffs the notion that black bourgeois values will rub off on him: “If I’m that insecure, my Black Consciousness must be pretty thin and superficial” (180). Avoiding the cooptation of his black consciousness, Lumumba permeates ego boundaries and
promotes consciousness expansion. In other words, he uses the Grand Cotillion’s stage to explode assumptions about middle-class respectability.

In an adlibbed demonstration, Lumumba and Yoruba, plan to make the Grand Cotillion black and beautiful. Unbeknownst to the Femmes Fatales, Yoruba and some of the other debutantes show up wearing their hair natural. Lumumba shows up wearing an African robe with one shoulder bare. Panicking over their plot, Yoruba thinks about ditching the cotillion before she debuts. Lumumba sympathizes with her but also equivocates: “But look at it this way. We won’t be messing it up. We’ll be beautifying it. We’ll be making it Black and beautiful and significant […]” (232). As Lumumba chants “Up the Black Nation!” a drunken Matt and a perplexed Daphne join in with the solidarity of intraracial difference. Albeit a fragmented experience, the Grand Cotillion represents a postmodern space of dispersal rather than the prospect of favoring one experience over another.

Through Lumumba, The Cotillion demonstrates another thrust against the postulates of Femmes Fatales’ traditions. Ironically, while Lumumba participates in numerous bourgeois activities, to “dig the source” and gain material for a novel he’s working on, he neglects his writing. Nonetheless, he delivers a poetic musing on falseness and reality: “Be done with false illusions! Come with us to the real world” (238). His words imply that he mingles artifice with authenticity. The distinction between the “really real thing” and the kitsch not only falters, it collapses. Finally, Killens portrays the internal mutability of institutions. On the one hand, the novel disturbs the tensions at the nexus between the loyal and dissenting members of the Femmes Fatales and the conflict between Daphne’s social milieu and her pretensions.
On the other hand, it gives voice to other narratives within the club and highlights the connections between them.

**The Fabric of Relations and Dissent**

Because class in contemporary African American experiences often involves the sharing of group mores, Killens portrays avenues of dissent in *The Cotillion*. Even though the novel delves into the inextricable links between different lived realities, these links get obscured in social organizations like the Femmes Fatales. However, postmodernism makes the acculturation process appear much less impermeable. As Lyotard puts it in *The Postmodern Condition*,

> A *self* does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at ‘nodal points’ of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. Or better: one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. (15)

In exploring class tensions within black communities, *The Cotillion* shows how the self connects to an ever-evolving “fabric of relations” and receives social messages. As Killen’s unveils this fabric, we find that any social experience in the novel is always already linked to multiple subjectivities and dissenting ideas.

Lyotard’s postmodern understanding of dissent suggests that organizations like the Femmes Fatales and the Kool Krazy Kats will evolve in terms of the language and social mores that surround them. The Brooklyn Crowning Heights’ and Harlem debutantes explore other class experiences because of their curiosity. Even those outside the conspirators who don afros at the Grand Cotillion “heard about the plot through the grapevine and joined it of [their] own volition” (224). Most importantly, though, *The Cotillion* brings together the Harlem debs with their middle class colleagues.
and the Brooklyn debs with their white counterparts, thereby exposing them to different racial experiences.

The Femmes Fatales acts as an exclusive organization. A club belonging to the upper classes, they pride themselves on their distinction. Thomas Vargish, in *Rewriting Democracy*, describes an Absolute System as an organization isolated from external influence and instilling order through self-aggrandizement. The Femmes Fatales touts that they have “always been more than just a social club. More than a social club. We have always been civic-minded and interested in helping in the uplift of our fellowman, those less fortunate than ourselves [...] To brighten darkened corners wherever they may be” (73). This history of civic engagement speaks to the Femmes Fatales’ social and geographic separation from working-class and poor blacks. The Femme Fatales have recruited debs in accordance with a single value structure and along class lines, while the cultural sensibilities of the advantaged and disadvantaged debutantes have meshed and taken on a postmodern character that does not evade heterogeneity.

Dissenting ideas within the Femmes Fatales surface during a soiree hosted by one of its members, Zenith Jefferson. The unabashed Zenith Jefferson and the outspoken Beverly Brap-bap maintain a subculture of dissent within the organization. Figuring herself as the voice of reason, the Femmes Fatales as shortsighted, and the debs as cogs in a problematic social experiment Brap-bap addresses the difficulties of creating a progressive entity without dissent. But neither Brap-bap nor Jefferson pursues the obliteration of their organization’s principles. In addition, they do not request the membership of working-class girls alone, which would prove misguided. Brap-bap settles for a revisionist approach and Jefferson “thought the whole Cotillion bit was one
big good joke, which she went along with, strictly for the laughs […]” (108). This situation speaks volumes because so much African American fiction portrays opposition to staid institutions but does not offer ways of subverting the class constructs that besmirch them. Undoubtedly, dissent has a redemptive power for social organizations nearly undone by their defunct by-laws, but Killens’s novel charges any group with welcoming dissenting voices and with assessing their base values.

Because the Femmes Fatales preoccupy themselves with the lore of their traditions, the mixed racial history and class diversity within their own ranks goes unacknowledged. Because the Femmes Fatales obscure their fabric of relations, Brap-Bap interjects a measure of historicity into a false recollection of the good old days when aristocratic black families “had a splendid staff of servants.” Brap-Bap’s revision includes the mention of “cousin clubs”:

Migrant workers. They would have them shipped up here from Virginia, Georgia and Barbados and South Carolina, right out the cotton patch and the cane fields, and live with them to help them pay them mortgages. They were paying guests, but since the colored muck-the-mucks were not supposed to let rooms for rent, these people were palmed off to everybody else as first cousins, second cousins, distant cousins. High-yaller families with jet-black cousins. (130)

In problematizing the historical record, Brap-Bap recuperates the erased individuals who, due to their mischaracterized experiences, do not exist within the selective annals of the Femmes Fatales’ narrative. Revisions such as this create a postmodern environment in which organizations can acknowledge the social and cultural particularities of its membership while respecting the differences that abound. Such a posture would only serve to strengthen the Femmes Fatales’ foundation by making them responsive to the novel’s culturally ebullient milieu.

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Resisting Consensus

At the Jefferson’s soiree, Yoruba witnesses a less sanitized version of black middle class culture, experiencing its spontaneity and joys. The Jeffersons adorn their home without pretense, display “original paintings on the wall of Black happenings by Black artists. Okay? There was even one of Malcolm” (109), and enjoy Speaking Afro-Americanese […].” Yoruba faces a challenge to her self-identity here not only because of her ambivalence toward middle class culture and the cotillion crowd but also because the Jefferson soiree compels that she adapt to a different environment, one which does not allow her an easy dismissal of all bourgeois culture. While the debutante process aims at driving Yoruba into “singlefulness of purpose” (113), her personality resists pegging into any one slot. In response to her displeasure with the whole process and her sense that she has compromised too much for her mother, Lumumba reassures her. He explains the larger plight to her in his own way:

I’m on your side, my queen. And we’re both on the side of Black folks. And your mother is not the enemy. If she is, then we are in a real big hurt. Cause your mother is where a whole heap of the Black and beautiful people of the Black Nation are at […] She just got her head all messed up with bourgeois aspirations. I mean, your mother is the Black masses that we’re supposed to be fighting for. If we can’t dig what’s bugging her, forget it. (183-184)

This reassurance strengthens Yoruba’s resolve. In the midst of social fragmentation, she can entertain new ideas at cotillion events and, in so doing, generate meaning by trafficking in her own flare to these experiences. Possessing a flexible sense of self, she grips the possibilities offered even in middle and working class culture, cultural nationalism, and Afrocentricity, among other sociopolitical ethics. Through her connections to Matt, Daphne, Lumumba, and the Femmes Fatales, Yoruba achieves an
evolving identity that resists consensus with any particular group with which she identifies.

Yoruba ultimately activates the postmodern at the Grand Cotillion in a way that gives her the wherewithal to sidestep resolving issues beyond the moment, for instance, future college attendance and her relationship with her mother. In short, Yoruba resists consensus. From a postmodern vantage, this means that the text posits dissent and difference in the place of a favored entity. But how does Yoruba avoid displacing her future uncertainty onto the Femmes Fatales? She, in effect, jettisons her burdens and lives in the present. This debut does not represent a moment of transcendence for Yoruba, but the interplay of multiple black experiences. Certifying Yoruba’s postmodern subjectivity, Killens ends the narrative with her pacing out the door of the Cotillion toward a viable, but uncertain, future.

Killens scrutinizes the postmodern framework Yoruba equips at the cotillion by highlighting the repressed tensions that emerge in the process of her training. Preparing for the Cotillion, Yoruba struggles to affirm a conception of beauty. In a moment of reflection, she finds herself before a mirror taking inventory of her features: “Gazing narrow-wide-eyed at the mirror. She turned her back and stared behind her. Then went into her dance, turning, spinning, pirouetting. I am Black and beautiful, O you daughters of Aunt Hagar” (144). In a Jungian sense, Yoruba poises herself for social determination, but a kind of determination, which does not aim for distinction. Yoruba debuts “short-and-nappy-haired” (238) and neither dons a wig nor suppresses her own anxiety to calm an exasperated Mrs. Patterson, the head of the Femmes Fatales. Seizing the moment, Yoruba takes the stage to mixed reactions that mirror her own
mixed feelings—“there was one loud gasp from the audience, then a murmur went over the ball room, then wild applause from some” (237). Her entrance represents a genuine moment of flux and a purging of other’s expectations. Yoruba tears up, her mother finds herself torn between fidelity to the Femmes Fatales and her family, and an enraged Mrs. Patterson goes berserk. Tellingly, Yoruba precipitated the dispersal of the cotillion crowd and the conclusion of the event with no consensus attained.

When Yoruba follows through with her plan to make the Cotillion black and beautiful, the novel says she possesses a kind of “nervous dignity” (237). Backstage at the Cotillion, she contemplates the question: “Was everything in this crazy world only fun and games when you got down to the nitty-gritty” (227)? Arriving at the venue wearing closely cropped hair, she escapes the angry grasps of the Femmes Fatales and debuts first. The novel describes Yoruba’s debut by saying, “Yoruba was the first natural woman to make her grand debut in the annals of cotillions, and when she debuted [sic], it was like the living end […]” (237). This passage shows the clashing of two traditions and the strong ambivalence that marks the cotillion.

Within a postmodern framework, one cannot seek consensus or biased institutional annals by which to grant oneself elite status. In this milieu, the individual must embrace his or her decenteredness, live in the moment, and face diverse social conditions. Finally, through the negotiation of class division across black communities, Yoruba comes of age via her exposure to cultural nationalism, embrace of Afrocentricity, and sojourn into middle class culture—débuting into postmodern subjectivity at the novel’s conclusion.
She even finds her niche in the confines of the Femmes Fatales. Moreover, as a text that flouts totalizing narratives, *The Cotillion* circulates several points of view throughout the text without centering a single one. In addition, not invested in triumphalism, the novel closes open-ended and resists a concrete resolution. The tactics taken by Yoruba demonstrate the ways in which she chooses heterogeneity, dissent, and difference in lieu of institutionalization. Moreover, Killens makes no assumption that the ending represents a transcendental moment. In fact, he questions the fidelity of black social movements and organizations—those trafficking in “dignity, peace and power and liberation and Nationhood. The Black extremist demagogues who can’t be bribed, and so you know they can’t be trusted. That’s the thing you got to watch” (239). Lastly, Yoruba’s contemporary condition—one marked by self-consciousness and fragmentation—all but ensures her involvement in spaces where difference flourishes. Accordingly, through the linking of different experiences, the novel renders other social ideologies accessible.

In *The Cotillion*, the tradition-fracturing values of Yoruba and Lumumba prove both paradoxical and viable in destabilizing the status quo. As the novel’s ending alludes to, the postmodern condition favors dissent and not consensus. Rather than Daphne’s former approach of siding with the upwardly mobile and disparaging classed Others, Lumumba and Yoruba subvert exclusionary institutions by imposing on them social difference. An awareness of the extensive class politics in operation in contemporary society can facilitate an insider-outsider critique of black institutions that suppress heterogeneity.
The culture work narrative extends beyond the Black Arts Novel. Culture work narratives have their benefits in the characterization that they do not shy away from the economic realities that abound in divergent class experiences. For this reason, Killens, in *The Cotillion*, fictionalizes the presence of several black experiences within the social terrain of an inherently conflicted, yet serious, existential movement in Black Nationalism. One viable solution to class division is often an insistence on cacophonous encounters with multiple experiences in a social space. In *The Cotillion*, Killens juts a postmodern sensibility up against stagnating, marginalizing, and repressive class traditions. The text moves in opposition to the overvaluation of white practices and values by blacks with middle class aspirations. Lastly, the novel introduces fluidity into the black experiences ascribed to different classes, ideologies, and social organizations. In doing so, *The Cotillion* addresses intraracial class tensions--taking as its backdrop the historic emergence of the micropolitics of difference within black communities, including race, class, and gender. Inasmuch as the novel satirizes the interfacing of different belief systems, social mores, and traditional ways of knowing, it also tests the viability of such a project and presents a literary context for class relations in postmodern African American life.
Robert Butler’s *Contemporary African American Fiction* identifies a key feature in African American literature that takes the individual journey as a process wherein the freedom to define oneself unfolds. Butler highlights the agreement between the American and African American literary canons and the way they imagine open-ended movement in fictional narratives, which serves the desire for social mobility. Writers “characteristically view movement and change as intrinsically valuable—a process of endless becoming rather than progress culminating in a state of completed being. Such open movement becomes a compelling metaphor of the American desire for the ‘new life,’ consisting of unlimited personal development” (11). Butler’s argument references the journey motif, which has its roots in early twentieth century literature and its recent extensions in the postmodern era. This motif places a high premium on change and the need to continually renew one’s self in contemporary times, and in this way, pivots off the social and cultural upheavals in American society. Butler’s chapter on Toni Morrison looks at her tendency in her fiction toward a resistance to settling in a single place and opting for the space to expand upon conceptions of the self. Morrison’s characters, often situated in agrarian society, must negotiate the weight of history and tradition. Her unique theme represents a dialectic that traverses the canon. Perhaps the creation of opposition between one’s physical place and individual space grounds the journey motif. This logic balances out the sociocultural upheavals that occur and are invariably out of an individual’s hands.
Chapter five analyzes Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby* as a contemporary African American novel that thematizes personal journeys. The novel demonstrates the ways African American novelists have swapped out the expectations consistent with racial traditions for more generative sensibilities, which develop out of postmodern conditions. In contemporary fiction, individual journeys lead to the prospect of new social and cultural paradigms. Therefore, Morrison’s *Tar Baby* explores the existential challenges of multiple characters and the losses and gains in their identities.

**Morrison’s Philosophical Leanings**

Overtime, the study of Morrison’s attention to history has evolved to include her insight on black social movements. In her work *Remember: The Journey to School Integration*, Morrison captures the struggle of black Americans pursuing the desegregation of public schools. According to Karen Stein, Morrison examines “differing approaches to black identity during the Civil Rights Movement” (3). Madhu Dubey’s *Black Women Novelists* names Morrison’s *Sula* as a work that “embodies a radically new black femininity that upsets all the oppositions (between past and present, individual and community, absence and presence) that structure Black Aesthetic Discourse” (51). Bridging an encounter between critical race theory and African American literary studies, Richard Schur’s “Locating *Paradise* in the Post-Civil Rights Era” reads Morrison’s *Paradise* as a discussion of the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement and the possibility of social reform in the twenty-first century.

Criticism on Morrison’s oeuvre tends to privilege her work as beholden to modernist philosophy. Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* and W. Lawrence Hogue’s *Race, Modernity, Postmodernity* explore the modernist dimensions of Morrison’s work. The constellation of arguments has suggested that Morrison interrogates modern black
life and imagines a confrontation between Eurocentric ideas and diasporic truths. Moreover, she concerns herself with the experiences of black Americans before the onslaught of American modernization. Still, more recently, Justine Tally’s *The Story of Jazz*, and Yogita Goyal’s *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature*, both the modern and postmodern dimensions of Morrison’s fiction. Rife with both philosophical markers, her work often reclaims alternative mythologies and finds cultural tradition insoluble with the social imperatives of the contemporary world.

Overall, novels like *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* receive the most critical attention as it concerns postmodernism. My view of Morrison’s *Tar Baby* is that, unlike the aforementioned novels, it represents a postmodern American reality and contemporary relationships, and also undoes the modern trend to see individualism as reckless. Critics like John Duvall, Linden Peach, and Thomas Hove identify postmodern nuance in Morrison’s fiction.\(^1\) Significantly, Morrison creates embattled characters so as to signal their influence in shifting entrenched values. In this way, *Tar Baby* challenges the modern social order she contextualizes in other novels.

Thus, *Tar Baby* champions an individual’s process of developing self-awareness. I argue that Morrison offers a perspective on the Post-Civil Rights Era via the neglected tensions within familial, southern agrarian, and upper middle class experiences. The novel disseminates multiple truths (or ways of seeing the world) to protagonists for the purpose of demonstrating the ways in which such an acknowledgment can lead one

\(^{1}\) John Duvall’s *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison* cites her complex representation of blackness and questioning of subjectivity (15, 17). Linden Peach, in his work titled after Morrison points out the intersection between black cultural legacy and moral responsibility (2, 6). Lastly, Thomas Hove’s essay, in the collection *Postmodernism: The Key Figures*, looks at Morrison’s attention to the construction of meaning among marginalized populations.
beyond a knee-jerk appropriation of traditional value systems. In the postmodern era, protagonists must find agreeable paths in life despite traditional obligations and strained love relationships.

**On the Move: Open Journeys**

In *Another Man Gone: The Black Runner in Contemporary Afro-American Literature* (1977), Phyllis Klotman observes the trope of the running man in American literature and its nuanced form in contemporary African American fiction. The journey motif often posits a “protagonist who rejects the values of the culture or society in which he [or she] finds himself [or herself] by birth, compulsion, or volition, and literally takes flight” (3). Extending Klotman’s characterization to include women protagonists, I find that her notion of “the runner as defector” bears useful implications for Morrison’s *Tar Baby*. This running is “less a mark of alienation” than self-reliance and epitomizes a shift from “the expectations for recognition of worth” (95, 129). In general, the running associated with texts like William Melvin Kelley’s *dem* and Morrison’s *Sula* feature the separation from constricting Amerocentric mythology or an imposed cultural narrative. Ultimately, the protagonists’ environments dictate that they move away from traditional ways of identifying themselves.

Just as the journey motif creates opportunities for personal development, it also acts as acknowledgement of the incessant struggle for self-autonomy. Novelists have come to speak about the generation gap and the passing of, or the rejection of the torch (read: cultural memory) to generations impacted by postmodern society. Open journeys allows readers to focus on a protagonist’s frenetic movement from one disparate environment to another. Suffice it to say, even when such movement takes place, it is
not seamless. The individual bears the trace of ideological markers identifiable with previous sites.

While the journey motif stretches throughout the earliest texts in the African American literary canon, it undergoes nuanced complexity in the Post-Civil Rights Era. Slave narratives adopted the theme, featuring treks into freedom. Protest novels depict withdrawal from the urban city, which does not make good on it promises of opportunity, while contemporary fiction portrays the symbolic retreat into prelapsarian communities. Mid-twentieth century modern narratives mirrored the frustration that fuelled black social movements at the time. However, the postmodern pursues very real shifts in thinking about resistance to material deprivation. Writers recast the journey motif in terms that realize the need for actual exploration, be it legitimated by a given social movement or experience. Contemporary writers reckon with the difficulties of achieving self-identity in an era of cultural heterogeneity. By this same token, such an undertaking necessarily leaves journeys open-ended in novels. Thus, the journey motif must validate the reworking of one’s relationship to his or her social reality.

In the late twentieth century, postmodernity gives credence to the authority of individual truth in fiction. Loren Quall’s *Dark Language: Post-Rebellion Fiction* uses the term post-rebellion fiction to identify the nature of contemporary black writing, which seeks to provide a pleasurable reading experience and a material understanding of black life after the Civil Rights Movement. Quall describes this fictional rhetoric as based on nostalgia and critical memory. I am concerned with critical memory, which “implies a continuous arrival at turning points and decisive change, which is usually attended by considerable risk, peril, or suspense and always seems imminent” (15).
This drive resonates with Henri Lefebvre’s description of space, which rejects the idea of it as a site of passive social relations (The Production of Space 11,142) but unveils an inevitable power struggle. One must muster enough power to construct and to defend a given space. Therefore, the contemporary protagonist can fix his or her own parameters and fulfill their ambitions, provided they engage the levers of power that dictate behavior, identity, and authority.

While black novelists lead us down a path away from burdensome traditions, African American life during the late twentieth century compels new strategies for coping with a number of challenges in the fast-paced, global age. The political vanguards that once fought to keep the plight of black Americans at the forefront find themselves eroding. Cornel West remarks on the havoc wreaked by “imperial corporations as public life deteriorates due to class polarization, racial balkanization, and especially a predatory market culture” (“Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization” 115). Even as the political context in this age becomes more partisan, and so, impotent to handle such cultural decay, still some will speak out about the marginalization of black urban America. For West, in the postmodern era, black strivings will continue to move against the grain, marshaling a radical politics that can survive black America’s escalating identity, gender, and political crisis.

The need to tether oneself to a belief foundational to one’s heritage proves ineffective in the contemporary era. Postmodernity’s self-awareness does not comport with upholding conventions but with transcending past conventions. As a result of the civil rights revolution, the minority cultural production of which Andreas Huyssen speaks in After the Great Divide “added a whole new dimension to the critique of high
modernism and to the emergence of alternative forms of culture” (198). When we consult black women’s writing, in particular, readers find that “women’s art, literature, and criticism are an important part of the postmodern culture of the 1970s and 1980s and indeed a measure of the vitality and energy of that culture” (199). Significantly, African American literature illustrates that the inclusion of blacks into egalitarian America brought out alternatives to past notions.

African Americans come out of the Civil Rights Movement and revise social expectations. With the expansion of the black middle class and the critical force of black popular culture, marginalized groups in the Post-Civil Rights Era look to the strength of their individual desires. Still group autonomy does not become a foregone conclusion. Tommie Shelby’s We Who Are Dark salvages the crux of nationalist solidarity, arguing against collective identity in favor of difference and what he calls “collective control.” As Shelby points out, the former “is not a necessary condition for cultivating effective bonds among African Americans, and in fact that attempting to forge one would be self-defeating” (11). His liberatory project revises the struggle against racial inequality in the post-Civil Rights Era. I share Shelby’s sense that blacks should preserve distinct identities, and I argue that multiple truths can be preserved and appreciated for their value to a given individual. The exploitation and commodification rife in American systems necessitates a commitment to the maintenance of cultural ways of knowing, which take on fluidity once appropriated by postmodern individuals.

Literary criticism accounts for the retooling of cherished principles in a manner that does not allow the tendency to question to be vilified. Doreen Massey’s essay “Double Articulation: A Place in the World” discusses the inevitable differences in the conception
of any given place: an individual’s relationship to a place cannot be deemed more legitimate that another’s sense of that place. Even though Massey argues that there can be no single truth about a place, she does not reject the idea that traditions may be attached to a place. Rather, she calls for anti-essentialism in the way writers and critics think about cultural identity and place. As Massey sees it, tradition does not “have to be merely closed and self-serving: it too can recognize a past openness” (119). Massey’s argument about the characterization of place has relevance for fictional settings. The way a character views a site depends upon the social terms he or she brings to the table. Writers, in a time of when close-knit communities have shrunken, come to see the individual process of coming to terms with the ideology of one’s upbringing as crucial to the maintenance of familial bonds, not their destruction.

Inasmuch as the journey motif signifies new prospects and a move away from the familiar, individuals must also relinquish the ethos of mainstream institutions. In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison suggests that the problems Jadine and Son face in *Tar Baby*, while affected by gender roles, has more to do with the more innocuous differences American culture offers. In particular, “they had a problem about what work to do, when and where to do it, and where to live. Those things hinged on what they felt about who they were, and what their responsibilities were in being black” (“An Interview with Toni Morrison” 422). Morrison’s novel, focused on the contemporary implications of Jadine’s and Son’s relationship, addresses the extraneous pressures they face. The Post-Civil Rights Era, though marked by substantive life chances, comes packaged with very real issues of choice and trajectory that feed back into all of Jadine’s and Son’s endeavors.
The representation of journeys undertaken by men and women protagonists reflects the intersecting thematic interests of contemporary black male and female authors. For instance, writers like Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, Colson Whitehead, and Richard Perry portray men and women protagonists with equanimity in gender complexity. Like Morrison, the aforementioned authors take on culturally weighty issues of authenticity and racial consciousness in their works. With the journey theme, the attention to the complexity of individuals across class boundaries and the refusal to shy away from the emotional vulnerabilities accompanying different attachments come to the forefront.

**Postmodern Truth**

As it concerns postmodernity, Morrison’s discourse comes out of a cultural dynamic in which characters, though beholden to truths, (cultural, social, spiritual, or otherwise) refuse to relinquish their personal conceptions of truth. This dynamic crosses racial boundaries. One retreats to these truths during altercations when another’s viewpoint does not jibe with his or her own when they cannot square it with their conception of the world and their role within it. Overcoming such self-consciousness, Morrison’s characters strike out on less familiar life paths. Individuals must find themselves—to their benefit or detriment—and explore their own truths. For example, Jadine and Son leave behind uncertain lives for uncertain futures. For them, upsetting the apple cart of family and friends and experiencing the unknown (whether sustaining the experience or not) validates the journey.

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison concerns herself with the recognition of different conceptions of truth and the forms of control deployed in contemporary social interactions. As author, she conveys the modalities of social determination in African
American experiences and links them to transgressive behavior—behaviors that embrace the social flux of postmodern society. She sets a number of her characters on the course of mastering their own destiny, at once vying for control of their own lives while stressing the need for stabilizing support. Ultimately, *Tar Baby* displays a range of critical inquiry where it concerns maneuvering through contemporary society. As it concerns the more far-reaching socioeconomic conditions of postmodern society, Morrison attaches these issues to locations like Philadelphia, New York, and the North proper.

The site of New York in the novel represents the postmodern flow of late capital, hedonism, and cultural difference. On the one hand, in New York, the dynamism surrounding awakens innovation and desire in Jadine. On the other hand, Son diagnoses the monotony of life for blacks in New York as a grievous and painful experience. The women seem starved to death for meaning behind desks in large corporations. The men display queer identities implicitly in part because of the absence race men. Even the performances of black actors and actresses on television seem to lack substance, “without irony or defiance or genuine amusement. Now all he heard were shrieks of satisfaction” (216). For Son, “it was less an error in judgment than it was being confronted with a whole new race of people he was once familiar with” (217). However, he almost succumbs to the allure of the postmodern city and the preoccupation with upward mobility. Nonetheless, “if ever there was a black woman’s town, New York was it” (222). Fast-paced and intoxicating, New York holds Jadine’s attention. Notwithstanding, Morrison marks their entire stint in New York with distraction: “Son and Jadine hadn’t the foggiest notion that spring was on its way.
Vaguely aware of such things when they were apart, together they could not 
concentrate on the given world. They reinvented it, remembered it through the other” 
(230). In addition, the friendships Jadine and Son develop prove fleeting because they 
lack substance and do not engage their concerns. 

Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* offers context 
relevant to *Tar Baby’s* New York. She describes the ethos of postmodern cities as 
detrimental. The city’s inhabitants see the illusion of diversity in the touting of ethnic 
communities and city centers. In the postmodern city, the vast development represents 
a false cultural pluralism, where decisions made by those in power subsume the ideas 
of others. The detriment to most inhabitants comes by way of an unseen hierarchy that 
creates the veneer of substance through technology, luxury, and unending attractions. 
As Jacobs explains, a postmodern society coaxes its resident’s aspirations toward the 
financial apex of urbanization. Urbanization disfavors the diverse populations, which, 
while highly visible, experience the strongest sense of alienation. Moreover, 
postmodernity equates diversity with the contemporary city, while the inequalities that 
attend the postmodern condition stifle robust diversity. 

Through Valerian Street’s past in Philadelphia, we witness the decline of industrial 
manufacturing, which characterizes one facet of the postmodern era and the kind of 
patronizing behavior we see with Valerian. At the beginning of the novel, Valerian 
enjoys his retirement on the Isles de Chevaliers. But Valerian Street’s retirement from 
the candy industry brings the postmodern age and its philosophical flanks into focus. 
After his father’s death, Valerian had inherited the Street Brothers Candy Company. He 
immediately went under the tutelage of his sentimental uncles at the age of seven.
Determined to retire before he became too “sentimental and not professional” (51), Valerian sold the candy factory to a candy conglomerate, when he realized his son Michael would not take over. At 68, he retires, but Morrison leaves us with what he considers his uncles’ sentimental behavior to understand his next moves.

Though Valerian describes his uncles’ decision to sell Valerians (a confection named after Valerian) to a sizable black population in the South as sentimental, a racial animus exists in their practices, namely the exploitation of black labor. Not only do they make the product made from left over “syrup sludge” from their number one brand Teddy Boys, but also they plan to “manufacture a box of Valerians in Mississippi where beet sugar was almost free and the labor too” (51). Though Valerian thinks his retirement allows him to escape their ways, he too seeks nothing more than a paternalistic attachment with other races.

Valerian purchases the island L'Arbe de la Croix, where he surrounds himself with a diversity that operates solely for the sake of his maintenance. He employs a Filipino boatman, two black American servants (Ondine and Sydney work as Valerian’s maid and butler), several indigenous workers, and an Algerian Dentist. Despite that however, he does not adopt a postmodern sensibility. Morrison describes Valerian in methodical terms:

[He]e checked catalogs, brochures and entered into ringing correspondence with nurseries from Tokyo to Newburg, New York. He read only mail these days, having given up books because the language in them had changed so much—stained with rivulets of disorder and meaninglessness. However, Valerian wants relaxation and peace from outsiders and the social concerns he left behind on the US mainland. He avoids what he can neither control nor limit the scope of, namely encounters with the island’s racial others and the postmodern cultural changes in America he avoids by not reading books.
Valerian’s son Michael has postmodern views of connectedness that come in stark contrast to his own. Margaret, Valerian’s wife, expects Michael during the holidays (though he hasn’t visited in years), but Valerian scoffs about their son’s eclectic lifestyle. Michael moves from anthropological work with several Native American tribes to numerous careers: “A band manager, shepherd, poet-in-residence, film producer, lifeguard out to study law, the more environmental the better. An advantage really, since he’s certainly had enough environments to choose from” (27-28). Despite criticism, Michael’s sentiments tend to have a reverberating effect with members of the Street household.

Morrison circulates ideas about racial consciousness in *Tar Baby*, linking notions of history and progress to others’ perceptions of his worldview, though he only appears by name in the novel. Michael lives an agrarian life, demonstrates solidarity with minority cultures, and appreciates frugal behavior. But his absence and pending arrival to L’Arbe de la Croix does not serve as a catalyst for consciousness-raising. While Valerian describes Michael in postmodern terms, as occupying many subject positions, he interprets Michael’s life as escapist, and Margaret often misunderstands his convictions. Ridiculing what he considers Michael’s concept of racial progress, Valerian opines, “I think he wanted me to string cowrie beads or sell Afro combs. The system was all fucked up he said and only a return to handicraft and barter could change it. That welfare mothers could do crafts, pottery, clothing in their homes, like the lace-makers of Belgium and voila! Dignity and no more welfare” (73).

While Michael’s views stir the emotions of Sydney, Ondine, and Jadine, they also have implications for the conflicting biases held by Valerian and Margaret. In addition,
Valerian and Margaret exhibit a defensive reaction to black solidarity and its implications for their household. When Valerian learns that Jadine is thinking about opening a retail business, he’s concerned that Sydney and Ondine might leave his employment and join Jadine’s venture. Ironically, Margaret and Valerian judge the lack of racial solidarity they see in their workers. Margaret steers Jadine toward “blackening up or universaling out […]”—polarizing her fragile racial consciousness (64). More interesting, when Son (a fugitive) unknowingly squats in the house for a few days, Valerian has feelings of “[d]isappointment nudging contempt for the outrage Jade, Sydney, and Ondine exhibited in defending property and personnel that did not belong to them from a black man who was one of their own” (145). While Valerien does not entertain any extensive conversation about his own racial bias, his thoughts suggest that he sees the black residents as equally oppressed.

Within the context of Valerian’s patriarchy, Michael’s postmodern philosophy calls for a rethinking of the capitalist system in which Valerian operates. His ideas however neither fit the status quo nor offer a feasible corrective, which Valerian decries as “handicraft and barter.” But they do create a much broader conversation within the context of the novel. Late in the novel, an argument ensues on Christmas Day after Valerian’s fires two workers, Mary and Yardman. During the chaos, Valerian suffers a stroke when he learns that Margaret abused Michael when he was a child. Though unknown to him, Michael’s philosophy would serve him well in his subsequent rationalization of life. In what accrues to the novel’s sense of postmodernity, Valerian questions his ontology:

*This is not life. This is some other thing. It comforted him a bit, knowing that whatever this was it was not life. He achieved a kind of blank, whited-
out, no-feeling-at-all that he hoped would sustain him until the blood tears came. Until his heart, revivified, pumped its way along for a single purpose: to spill out his eyes throughout the millennia he would have to live. (235)

The life that Valerian can no longer grasp afforded him the modern privilege to divest the family business, marry a much younger beauty queen, and buy a private island on which to retire. The passage suggests that Michael’s postmodern approach does not prove as escapist as his own. In fact, in order to truly avoid the nonchalant “sentimentality” of his uncles, Valerian will need to govern his approach to the social world in less methodical ways, allowing those around him to shape his worldview.

In addition, by having even Sydney, Ondine, and Jadine scrutinize Michael’s racial consciousness, Morrison implies the sociocritical framework with which to question their subordination. For example, Sydney labels Michael a spoiled child because he does not focus on a single issue. Ondine deems Michael a nuisance and hopes he will “stop coming in my kitchen to liberate me every minute” (36). Lastly, Jadine’s remembrance of him tells readers something, as it exposes her own ambivalence about why his ideas of racial community do not jibe with her mindset: “Actually, we didn’t talk; we quarreled. About why I was studying art history at that snotty school instead of—I don’t know what. Organizing or something. He said I was abandoning my history. My people […] But he did make me want me to apologize for what I was doing, what I felt” (74-75). While Michael’s criticisms appear paternalistic in nature—the notion that Sydney and Ondine can make the privileged leap from working-class and benefactor to thinking through issues of upward mobility, financial independence, and ownership—they do eventually serve as a counterpart to other incidents, which compel that they take these matters more seriously. Moreover, the Christmas fiasco brings to the fore racial concerns and the ways they link to other inequalities. For example, Sydney and Ondine have the
much needed conversation about their future; their relationship with the Streets and Jadine. For the first time, they consider their meager finances and concerns about their ability to work should they leave the Streets’ employment.

While Michael gets socialized in a world that privileges appearances over reality (Margaret abuses Michael right under Valerian’s nose), the multiple epistemologies to which Michael later exposes himself represent his move away from the capitalist, repressive legacy of his parents: “He was a poet, presumably, and a Socialist, so social awkwardness wouldn’t trouble him the way it would have his father” (91). Through his solidarity with marginalized cultures, Michael dispenses with his sense of home. According to Jadine, Michael becomes a “cultural orphan” making “loving treks from ghetto to reservation to barrio to migrant farm […]” (145). Significantly, Michael’s and Jadine’s quarrels represent the starting point of her contention over her own ambivalence. What deserves her loyalty? Her career or her family. Having this conversation and conversations like these initiate her move into a personal truth that does not need validation. Lastly, after learning about Michael’s childhood abuse, Valerian, in a conniption, says he will visit Michael, but Margaret admonishes that he not think of Michael “like a piece of Valerian candy, but like a person on a bus, already formed, fleshed, thick with a life which is not yours and not accessible to you” (239). Tellingly, Morrison makes Michael’s truth largely inaccessible to the residents of L’Arbe de la Croix.

**The Post-Civil Rights Domain: The Street Household**

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison fashions a post-civil rights era devoid of overt political protest or the kind of racial vying for inclusion by black communities that I’ve discussed in the aforementioned chapters. Implications for the post-civil rights era play out in the
tenor of social battles that we can read as holdovers from the Civil Rights Era. Weighing in on the impediments to critical dialogue within black communities, Adolph Reed, in *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era*, looks at the misdirected nature of past black political practices. While Reed critiques civil rights leaders’ integrationist demand and their alliance with corporate liberals, he chides nationalists for not being adamant enough about their aim of economic and political control in black communities. Reed ascribes to both movements the expansion of a political base. Because of their “effectively reinscribed hierarchy” and insistence on a monolithic ideology, he also attributes to them the decline of robust, black opposition to systemic injustice (65-69). Morrison portrays this political reality, which characterizes the Post-Civil Rights era. Within this context, her protagonists must articulate new methods of resistance and collective action, at once made possible and compromised by integration, civil rights struggle, and nationalist thought.

Because Morrison’s aesthetic trends lend themselves to a number of artistic concerns, Marc C. Bonner reads her writing through the lens of western philosophical practice. Bonner comment on the tendency “to focus exclusively on the political, cultural, racial elements” (*The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison* xiii) of Morrison oeuvre segues into his exploration of classical aesthetic concepts. Nonetheless, his critical moves do compel a conversation about the illuminating effort of reading Morrison’s own impulse “to strip away the illusions to show why African-American life remains to many an embattled existence, and to minister to a beleaguered population […]” (xxiv) in the critical context of wide-ranging theories. Morrison’s portrayal of the Post-Civil Rights Era assists her in fleshing out some of the tensions of postmodern society.
A number of tensions over truth whether in terms of culture, ideology, or basic honesty surface in the novel’s Caribbean sites of the island of Dominique and the Isles de Chevaliers. In addition, L’Arbe de la Croix, the estate on which Valerian Street lives out his retirement. A wealthy white benefactor, Valerian presides over a diverse space. Yet his authority gets) gets questioned by others in the household, namely Margaret, Ondine, and Sydney. As Jadine and Son, members of the post-civil rights generation, come into the picture, they facilitate the hashing out of problems in everyone’s lives.

Jadine lives as an adopted child in Valerian’s Street’s home. An independent thinker, Jadine sees herself as unsure about her surroundings, life choices, and family ties. Therefore, she must come to terms with her own complexity. Taking assurance in her cosmopolitan outlook, she accepts her life as a departure from Ondine’s and Sydney’s (her aunt and uncle) working-class status and leaves Dominique for an entertainment career in Paris. Son (William Green) enters the Street home as a fugitive from the law. While there, he becomes familiar with the island’s lore and strivings of its black inhabitants. Rough around the edges but yet charismatic, Son becomes romantically involved with Jadine. They travel together, flitting back and forth geographically and emotionally, as they struggle to redefine their autonomy and to discover viable truths.

At twenty-five, Jadine undergoes an existential crisis that makes her feel inauthentic and vulnerable as a black American woman living abroad whose tastes and lifestyle do not subscribe to any essentialist experience. As Jadine explains, “sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside—not American—not black […]” (49). Jadine returns home to the Isles de Chevaliers to sort through
challenges she has faced in Paris. She leaves behind her Parisian Fiancée Ryk, because he cannot understand her need to be conscious of her racial self, and then works as a social secretary for Margaret. Contemplating her next career move Jadine wants to “[give] up looking for the center of the fear” (44) that welled up in her in Europe. In Paris, the sight of a stunning, dark-skinned woman in a yellow dress shakes Jadine to her core. She experiences a sublime moment.² In Morrison’s words, “Just a quick snatch of breath before that woman’s woman—that mother/sister/she; that unphotographable beauty—took it all away” (46). Afterward, “the woman’s insulting gesture [spitting toward Jadine] had derailed her—shaken her out of proportion to incident” (47). Though familiar with art and photography, Jadine finds that she cannot capture the sight of the woman in yellow in a way that grasps the sublimity of the moment (while absorbing the shock of her rudeness) and maintains the subjectivity of her own life experience.

One post-civil rights’ concern deals with the ways Jadine constructs her identity as a racial subject in a mixed household? Morrison tasks Jadine with working through her racial identity crisis. In particular, she must look beyond her experience with upper middle-class life and contend with her sociocultural heritage. During her hiatus, Jadine not only comes to terms with the posh world of international celebrity but also with her privilege in the Street household. In addition, Jadine makes a connection with Son, who emblematizes southern black culture. Lastly, her relationship with her benefactors,

² Cribbing from Immanuel Kant, Lyotard’s The Postmodern Condition describes this experience as a sublime moment. For Lyotard, “We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to ‘make visible’ this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate” (78).
Valerian and Margaret and her actual relatives, Ondine and Sydney, comes to a head when she leaves them behind for the cosmopolitan scene with which she feels most comfortable.

In *Tar Baby*, Sydney’s and Ondine’s presence in the Street household informs the race and class dynamics in the home. The novel implies that Sydney comes from a line of middle class blacks. Also, the reader learns that Sydney and Ondine adopt Jadine from her absent mother. We encounter these endearing qualities, but the text never grants access to Sydney’s life before his post with the Street family or Ondine’s younger years. Readers do however catch a glimpse of their personal politics in moments of crisis.

Sydney himself deploys class politics reminiscent of the intraracial class tensions of the Civil Rights era. When Son first appears in the house, running from the law and slipping in unnoticed, Sydney reels from the shock of holding a pistol to the head of the stranger and then soon after showing the squatter to a guest room, upon Valerian’s request. Sydney regards Son’s social status as inferior to his own. Even Ondine convinces him that “The man upstairs wasn’t a Negro—meaning one of them. He was a stranger” (102). In this way, they pathologize Son as both racially and socially deviant. When Son explains why he hid inside of their home for a time without revealing himself, Sydney declares,

*I know you but you don’t know me. I am a Phil-a-delphia Negro mentioned in the book of the very same name. My people owned drugstores and taught school while yours were still cutting their faces open so as to be able to tell one of you from the other. And if you looking to lounge her and live off the fat of the land, and if you think I’m going to wait on you, think twice!* (163)
Interestingly enough, Sydney signifies on W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Philadelphia Negro*, a sociological text in which Du Bois himself places little emphasis on the ways in which working-class and poor blacks negotiate class hierarchies and nuanced social contexts. Readers can neither situate Son into the primitive barbarism Sydney ascribes to him nor can they consider him acculturated in the sophistication ascribed to Philadelphia Negroes. Though identified as southern, Morrison does not fix Son’s character geographically but makes him adaptive to his environment.

Morrison brings to the fore issues of parity as Son comes to understand Sydney and Ondine and vice versa. Son visits Sydney’s and Ondine’s apartment in the rear of L’Arbe de la Croix to apologize. Son explains that he does not have identification but will leave when Valerian secures papers for him. In addition, Son plays out the role of remorseful reprobate to win over Sydney. He calls him Mr. Childs and feigns appreciation for Valerian’s largess. But ultimately Son asserts himself as equal to the three black and the two white residents at the Street’s home at Christmas dinner when he openly questions Valerian’s bias in firing Gideon (Yardman) and Marie Thérèse Foucault (Mary) for stealing apples. Moreover, to Valerian’s chagrin, Son refuses to leave when he orders him to do so, and instead Son brings about an airing of unspoken grudges.

Early on, Jadine questions the racial politics undergirding Son’s stay at L’Arbe De La Croix from a perspective on black culture that speaks to her post-civil rights era sensibility. For Jadine, “Sydney was right. He should have shot you on the spot. But no. A white man thought you were a human being and should be treated like one” (121). In this passage, Jadine not only dehumanizes Son but also she does so in a way
pits the legitimacy of his blackness against Sydney’s (as does Sydney). While the novel does acknowledge that Jadine has not seen a black man that she associates with southern black culture in ten years, her current circle now includes black men who concern themselves with “making it,” with careers more than with racial consciousness. To be sure, Jadine’s philosophy grows out of an experience most identifiable with the post-civil rights era—an era which she cannot figure Son into.

Morrison addresses the remaining tension between the privilege enjoyed by white women and the domestication of black women in a post-civil rights context. In the midst of Sydney’s erratic behavior, Ondine has her own dilemma. Most acutely, she harbors a deep distrust of Margaret even though commonalities exist between the two of them. For instance, Margaret marries Valerian at the age of seventeen. Also a young wife, Ondine enters the Street household at twenty-three. Though at first cautious of each other, “The Search for Tomorrow” radio soap opera gives the two a mutual interest. However, Valerian reinstalls the dividing line, saying “she [Margaret] should guide the servants, not consort with them.” Since then, Margaret’s secret abuse of Michael loomed over their fragile relationship.

Ultimately, Ondine contests Margaret’s impunity because she sees the secret as a hindrance to her own autonomy. In fact, not until after Ondine reveals Margaret’s abuse do they revisit their friendship. But tellingly, Ondine and Margaret misdirect their anger toward each other: “The real target, who would not be riled until now when she got fed up with the name-calling and shot her water glass across the table. ‘Don’t you come near me!’ Margaret shouted, but Ondine did and with the back of her hand slapped Margaret across the face” (Emphasis added 208). Though Ondine lashes out over
Margaret’s abuse, she retaliates against a system of racial backlash that denies her the right to enjoy the comforts and privilege afforded white women and which marks a dividing line between a black maid and a white wife.

By voicing past anxiety, Ondine finds ways to heal in the post-civil rights era, but she has endured a burden. She had protected her family by not revealing Margaret’s abuse and remaining employed. In addition, Ondine startles everyone with the revelation that she came to Micheal’s rescue. Unfortunately, this knowledge becomes Ondine’s secret too; she suppresses her caretaker instincts. Margaret speaks her pain, as well, thanks Ondine, and begs her forgiveness. But this time Ondine rejects the burden of forgiving Margaret and rejoins with an imperative for Margaret: “‘You forgive you. Don’t ask for more’” (241). Amid their uncertain futures, Ondine finds agency in service to herself by divesting the burdens of others.

**Gender, Philosophy, and Cultural Narratives**

Morrison concerns herself with addressing the barriers to gender equity in the post-civil rights era. As it concerns women in the novel, most of them occupy marginal roles as servants, or they never have the platform from which to voice their angst. Margaret’s wishes have been subordinated to Valerian’s, Ondine serves as Valerian’s maid, Thérèse gets fired for stealing apples, and Alma Estee and the multiple Marys referred to in the novel exist in a kind of anonymity. Gender dominance reconstitutes in ways other than the exclusion of women; it creeps up via in-your-face gender bias. Further, Jadine comes to act as a kind of Everywoman, articulating the complacencies and anxieties of other women. As Morrison would have it, through Jadine, the women have their perspectives “widened [spoken in different contexts], then dispersed” (290).
The multiple contexts they proffer grant Jadine the privilege of not only speaking her truth but also expounding upon the truths of others.

*Tar Baby* links issues of gender with attempts by male characters to rein in women’s contemporary sensibilities. Alongside the disturbing physical violence that mars Jadine’s and Son’s frenetic, but brief relationship, they also do a kind of violence to each other’s worldview. In a battle of wits between Jadine and Son that takes place when prior to their relationship, Son questions how Jadine came to prominence in her career and implies that she did so through illicit sexual means. At the uttering of his grotesque inquiry, Jadine attacks him violently, and as they struggle, she threatens Son with reprisal if he rapes her. In response, Son questions her “‘Rape, why you little white girls always think somebody’s trying to rape you? Jadine is even more offended for his insinuations, “telling me what a black woman is or ought to be…’” (121). Jadine’s philosophy subordinates racial essentialism to primitive ignorance. This is why she describes him in animalistic terms. Though men have attempted worse treatment of her, Son’s mingling of racial notions with illicit sexual behavior unnerves her matter-of-fact distancing of racial assumptions directed at her.

Morrison brings to the fore issues of gender and control during Jadine’s brief time in Eloe. One of Son’s closest friends Soldier questions Jadine about their relationship. The dialogue unfolds with the question,

“‘Who’s controlling it?’ ‘Controlling what?’ ‘The thing. The thing between you two. Who’s in control?’ ‘Nobody. Were together. Nobody controls anybody,’ she said. ‘Good, he said. ‘That’s real good. Son, he don’t like control. Makes him, you know wildlike.’ ‘We don’t have that kind of relationship. I don’t like to be controlled either.’ ‘But you like to have it, don’t you?’ ‘Not with him’” (255)
Soldier’s confrontational dialogue chafes against Jadine’s contemporary ideas about relationship. Undoubtedly, Soldier rehearses a provocative binary. To his essentialist thinking, either Son will dominate the relationship or Jadine will. While Jadine could dismiss his questions as sexist, the realization that she cannot easily describe her and Son’s relationship in contemporary terms unnerves her. She finds her own hard-fought notions in competition with southern folk notions of a balance of power that favors the masculine. Within this context, she cannot assume that Son shares her fluid sense of how her relationship might offer a level playing field to them both.

Just as sexism and retrogressive assumptions challenge Jadine’s assertive approach to life, the very beliefs by which she lives jut up against the gendered cultural lore of Dominique. Gideon recounts the full story. Three hundred years ago, slaves aboard a sinking French vessel turn blind the moment they see the island of Dominique. Seeing with the eyes of their minds, the former slaves swim ashore along with the surviving horses and inhabit the island hills to this day: “‘They ride those horses all over the hills. They learned to ride through the rain avoiding all sorts of trees and things. They race each other, and for sport they sleep with the swamp women in Sein de Veilles [sic]” (152-153).

Aside from the gender politics in Gideon’s recounting, Jadine has difficulty visualizing one hundred men on one hundred horses, but she believes she almost has a fatal encounter with the swamp women when she falls in a tar pit. As Jadine sees it: “The women hanging from the trees […] knowing their steady consistency, their pace of glaciers, their permanent embrace, they wondered at the girl’s desperate struggle down below to be free, to be something other than they were” (183). Sinking into the Sein de
Veilles swamp, Jadine couches her struggle in fighting terms that reflect her inward battles. Moreover, throughout her first night in Elloe, the night women of which Gideon speaks, in a dream-like encounter “were all out to get her, tie her, bind her” (262). Accosting and tormenting her, Jadine believes the night women want to choke out her autonomy.

**A Native Son**

Several questions examining the significance of Son’s character emerge in *Tar Baby*: How does Son’s checkered background complicate his interactions with the Street family? Why is he conflicted with and hostile toward Valerian’s perspectives? What vantage point does he bring to the family? Highlighting attributes of postmodernism in *Toward a Postmodern Literature*, Ihab Hassan suggests that social phenomena in the postmodern era create ideologies around the unmaking of the self. In *Tar Baby*, Son appears in the text without family name or inheritance. On the run from his criminal past (Son inadvertently kills his wife Cheyenne in fit of rage over her adultery), Son jumps overboard and swims ashore to Valerian’s private island and squats in his home.

As a fugitive, society denies him access to stability. Having an existential crisis, Son wants to unmake the previous life he has constructed and reinstall a more fluid identity. Searching for some other way of being, he carries no identification or official documentation and imagines his life free of other trappings associated with contemporary life. Son works unlicensed on ships, consorts with gamblers, gigolos, and part-time mercenaries. Having convinced himself that work need not be joined to a given livelihood, he leads a nomadic existence. Suspicious of the changing American culture he reads about in *Time* magazine and the international press, Son cultivates a
postmodern perspective that resists the imposition of any knowledge beyond the visceral. He draws a map of the U.S. shaped like a deformed tongue and “join[s] that great underclass of undocumented men” (166). In doing so, Son relinquishes the need for an identity.

As a squatter, Son critiques the Street household from within and elicits outrage. A fear of otherness surfaces in the home with his arrival. When he greets Sydney at the dinner table, for the first time in his career Sydney drops a salad bowl and “barely made it to civility” (92). After Jadine calls Son uncivilized and inhuman, he grabs her fragrant body and says, “I smell you too” (122). Lastly, Son injures Margaret’s pride when he laughs at her fear that he will rape her. Ultimately, secrets unfold and a crisis ensues over household biases and anxieties.

Morrison complicates Son’s unmaking process through his identification with those subordinated by social status. Son conceptualizes a symbiotic relationship with Gideon while staying with the Streets. As he watches Gideon working in the yard through a window, remembrances of his former life in Eloe move him to tears. This moment precipitates the shaking off of upper class identity for Son even as he resides in the Street home: “You would have thought something was leaving him and all he could see was its back.” While Valerian’s servants reinforce his authority, Son takes from the hierarchical structure at L’Arbe de la Croix the admonition of maintaining “Some other way of being” (166). Son’s nonpretentious disposition and humble beginnings help him live a self-critical life, though at times chaotic, so that the privilege around him does not become his identity.
In *Tar Baby*, Son operates as a knower—a strong, impassioned character, who through the vicissitudes of America’s postmodern turn and his own choices (playing piano, Son’s wartime experience in Vietnam, driving his car into the bedroom of his wife, and subsequent fugitive existence), develops germane wit and wisdom. The knower unsettles, provokes, and quickens the anger of those around him, calling attention to the three-hundred-pound-gorillas of repression in the room and studying others’ perceptions. When those in authority ignores pertinent issues, as demonstrated by the absence of a conversation about race and class within the Street home, Son voices the opinions of the marginalized and reads their perspectives against privileged discourses. However, he cannot fully inoculate himself against conformist pressures.

In the midst of Son’s attempted unmaking of his erstwhile self, the postmodern city captivates his return to the U.S. Even before he travels to New York, Son begins to rethink his earlier conceptions: “There was a future. A reason for hauling ass in the morning. No more moment to moment play-it-as-it-comes existence. That stomach required planning. Thinking through a move long before it was made” (219). Yet, these thoughts conflict from the start. He opposes futurity and, disillusioned by crass materialism, Son comes to see New York as inadequate for his subjectivity.

To be sure, Son’s politics departs from capitalist striving. To get at Son’s politics, we must look at his answer to Jadine’s question “What do you want out of life” (169)? To Son’s thinking, the question really implied how he would situate himself in the American rat race. However, after he reminisces about the first dime he ever earned from Frisco, a man from his childhood, his quasi-answer becomes political when he replies, “Something nice and simple and personal, you know” (170)? Son’s spiel shows
that he can only imagine an adequate place for his politics as a place of community, epitomized by his sense of fraternity. He returns to Eloé because his father Old Man and three of his best friends Drake, Soldier, and Ernie Paul still live there.

While later in the novel, Son moves beyond these sentiments from “the man who prized fraternity” (205) to the man who “had changed, given up fraternity, or believed he had” (299), he never quite actualizes his postmodern leanings. He cannot locate any viable prospects within himself. Unfortunately, after a dispiriting break-up with Jadine, Son in his desperation chooses fraternity over autonomous individuality and embraces Gideon’s blind horsemen narrative as the solution to his dilemma. But to approach postmodernity skillfully, a whole individual must understand truth(s) as byproducts of multiple experiences and not always universally applicable. Ultimately, Son winds up back in Dominique, blindly approaching the mythical hills of the Isle de Chevaliers and running into the dark void: “the trees stepped back a bit as if to make the way easier for a certain kind of man” (306). While embracing a postmodern ethos does involve allowing space for multiple truths, it does not imply that embracing a single truth will grant an individual a productive sense of self.

Multiple Truths

In *Tar Baby*, Jadine undergoes a process of rethinking her perceptions of family, her career, and divesting herself of the expectations she attaches to both. In doing so, she comes to embrace her own truth in the post-civil rights era, the prospect of new racial concerns and a postmodern approach to her contemporary reality. In part, Jadine’s preoccupation with her future leads her and Son to New York after the Christmas reckoning where she revels in “efficiency and know-it-all sass.” The sass begins to unravel along with her projections about opportunities in New York. First, her
ability to make a living diminishes. At twenty-five, modeling agencies pass over Jadine because they do not see her as young and vibrant: “In Europe, they liked older looking black models but in the U.S. the look was twelve” (267). In addition, Jadine fails at her mission to civilize Son. Morrison leaves her to contend with answering the question: “Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing” (269)? To answer this question, Jadine returns to Dominique and works out her relationship to the multiple truths about culture and family espoused on the island.

Because *Tar Baby* renders the island’s folklore—the story of the blind race of horse riders and swamp women—inaccessible to anyone in the Street household, the text offers little hope that Jadine will quell her feelings of inauthenticity and vulnerability through the oral history of the Isles de Chevaliers. Thérèse and Gideon (Yardman) possess an organic understanding of the history of Dominique—a cultural truth, which becomes inaccessible when translated by American tourists and other outsiders. It does not follow then that knowledge of the island’s mythic history will help Jadine contend with her present moment.

As it were, Jadine goes on a journey to self-discovery in the novel and rejects the need for discovering anything not already within her. Moreover, she gives up looking for “the center of the fear” that wells up in her when she sees a striking black woman in a yellow dress, which plagues her from the beginning of the novel. Jadine embraces her own complicated reality. Her conception of truth now champions the prospect of an uncertain future. A postmodern subject, she neither requires a stabilizing narrative nor an attachment to the Streets, to Sydney and Ondine, to Gideon and Thérèse, or Son.
Jadine’s appropriation of a play-it-as-it-comes, her cognitive reframe, has immediate implications.

Morrison unsettles Jadine’s attachment to her family and the island as she engages in personal reflection about diverging perspectives, which represent their respective truths. Returning to L’Arbe de la Croix, Jadine skeptically inquires about Ondine’s situation since the Christmas catastrophe, but to Ondine’s chagrin, Jadine remains firm in her decision to leave everything behind. Furthermore, Morrison complicates Jadine’s transgressive behavior by pitting it against Ondine’s self-sacrifice. Ondine effectively adopts Jadine and takes a mother’s pride in her success. However, as Ondine cares for her, she assumes that Jadine will one day respond in kind.

In a heated conversation, Ondine admonishes Jadine that a real woman must first act as a daughter. For Ondine, a “daughter is a woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her” (281). Ondine’s brief diatribe articulates her generational way of conceptualizing family ties. But Jadine, very much a product of the post-civil rights era, can distance herself from obligations rooted in taxing notions of black community. Just as Jadine acknowledges Ondine’s truth, she inserts her own: “‘Your way is one, I guess it is, but it’s not my way. I don’t want to be … like you. Wait. Don’t look at me like that. I’m being honest with you now and you have to listen! I don’t want to learn how to be the kind of woman you’re talking about because I don’t want to be that kind of woman’” (282). In this revealing moment, Jadine does not discount Ondine’s truth. While Morrison exposes the tensions between notions of

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3 Jadine in a postmodern manner comes to accept her own truth about the imperfect path she will take in life. For her, she does not rebel from the tenets of Ondine and Sydney but chooses her own path and not allowing it to be seen as deviant.
womanhood that deviate from Ondine’s, their dialogue signals Jadine’s postmodern turn
toward finding within herself a sense of belonging and reclaiming an orphan identity.
But nowhere in the novel does Jadine’s reclamation completely free her from the
ambivalence of her choice. *Tar Baby* demonstrates a case in which Jadine’s vantage
creates a window of agency for her, not transcendence.

Given that Jadine frees herself from the will of others and no longer imposes her
will on others, she can enact the postmodern. In resituating Jadine as neither dissident
nor obligated saver-of-the-downtrodden, but as subject-in-transit, Morrison informs
Jadine’s exit. Jadine repurposes Ondine’s argument as she entertains “[n]o more
dreams of safety. No more. Perhaps that was the thing—the thing Ondine was saying.
A grown woman did not need safety or its dreams. She was the safety she longed for”
(290). At the end of the novel, Jadine flouts her common expectations of returning
home to the security of accommodating loved ones. Finding safety in herself, Jadine
neither fears the uncertainty of the entertainment business nor seeks the solace of an
island paradise.

Jadine’s flight to Paris functions as a flight into the uncertain tinder of life’s
experiences. As her plane takes off heading for Paris, Morrison describes Jadine’s
mindscape as the “stretch of fresh wings, the blinding anticipation and herself, there,
airborne, suspended, open, trusting, frightened, determined, vulnerable—girlish, even,
for an entire second and then another and another” (291). As evidenced by the
passage, Jadine’s postmodern truth does not fully resolve all her concerns, but it raises
her critical consciousness. The Street residence had the effect of suppressing
individual desires, making them incompatible with the status quo. However, Jadine can
now think reflexively and imagine alternatives to Valerian’s hierarchy and Ondine’s worldview. A postmodern sensibility contrasts with an uncritical environment because it opposes outlooks that pass themselves off as universal givens.

*Tar Baby* complicates Jadine’s postmodern condition by privileging plural truths. As Anna Yeatman puts it in *Postmodern Revisionings of the Political*, “those of us who are attempting to work with, and out of, postmodern perspectives [must come to realize:] Acceptance of the reality of the postmodern condition means a relinquishing of a nostalgic holding on to modern(ist) standards of reflection and critique” (3). Revamping her perspective on African American experiences, Morrison adopts reflexivity, which interrogates the complicated truths that circulate in the postmodern era. With *Tar Baby*, Morrison imbues the African American literary canon with the ability of combating notions of authenticity in the post-Civil Rights Era.

I have attempted to show that the journey narrative in postmodern African American fiction is informed by the lone recourse of contemporary individuals to work out critically their own conceptions of truth. While the critical weight that the journey narrative carries lessens as theories of postmodernism speak of cultural malaise and alienation en masse, writers must still acknowledge individual experience. As sociological discourse begins to look at the African American literary canon, the portrayal of this kind of truth-telling becomes a practical option for artists. Morrison’s *Tar Baby* facilitates a cultural, political, and social convergence in which new truths are subject to emerge, truths yet bearing traces of cultural heritage but amenable to one’s self-identity. Ultimately, the recognition of disparate truths spurs Jadine’s journey toward self-awareness. Morrison distills issues of family obligation in a way that
epitomizes the response of contemporary African American literature to postmodern conditions in black life. Morrison portrays the scramble for truth and control. As Morrison captures the postmodern, *Tar Baby* opens conceptual windows through which we see a plurality of truths as a complement to individual exploration.
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

John Glenn received his PhD in English at the University of Florida in 2012 with a concentration in African American literature, cultural studies, and theory. While there, he held an Alumni Doctoral Fellowship in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and served in a number of capacities on campus. He functioned as Activities Coordinator for the Black Graduate Student Organization, volunteered as a campus tutor, worked as an English teacher for Upward Bound, and served as a Peer Advisor for the Florida Board of Education Summer Fellowship Program. John Glenn’s current research interests include Postmodernism, African American literature, Cultural Studies, and Critical Theory.