

RE-CONFIGURING PATERNAL LEGACIES THROUGH RITUALISTIC ART:
DAUGHTERS AND FATHERS IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION BY WOMEN OF
AFRICAN DESCENT

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Dedication

To God and God Alone... This dissertation is dedicated to my Guardian Angels on this scholastic journey, Dr. Kirsten Jamsen and Ms. Tabitha St. Cyr. With the completion of this dissertation, I honor you.

Abstract

In “Re-Configuring Paternal Legacies through Ritualistic Art: Daughters and Fathers in Contemporary Fiction by Women of African Descent,” I analyze three contemporary novels by Black women authors to argue that their daughter-protagonists gain a sense of their own subjectivities as women of African descent through their imaginative and creative responses to their own muted paternal histories and legacies. These responses motivate the creation of ritualistic art forms rooted in communal practices such as storytelling, sculpting, music, dance-drama, folk medicine, and traditional cuisine.

In this dissertation, I use theoretical formulations developed in disciplines such as literary studies, gender studies, Brazilian regionalist studies, and African diaspora studies. These interdisciplinary approaches have allowed me to map the centrality of family, community, rituals, and art to the development of female subjectivity as represented in Marilene Felinto’s *As mulheres de Tijucopapo/The Women of Tijucopapo*, Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker*, and Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*. I define ritualistic art as any folk art form that individuals employ to achieve healing and transcendence, liberate muted histories, honor their spatial environments, and re-integrate themselves into their communities. I explore father-daughter relationships as connections that are held together by participation in ritualistic art forms that honors folk wisdom, storytelling, and vernacular utterances that are invoked through dreams, mythology, and archetypal figures of the African diaspora.

Throughout the dissertation, I consider how generations of survivors, generations of families work through issues of grief, forgiveness, and the need to

remember, the need to retell buried histories. I engage with these ideas within the context of the cultural productions of female artists, writers, and knowledge creators and their relationships to the legacies of their fathers. The concepts of paternal loss and paternal yearning in their various forms take a center stage in the art created by these daughter-protagonists. In the three texts examined, ritualistic art is described as practices that are multivocal, both here and there, multi-local, and multi-temporal—spanning time and space, bending and transfiguring the boundaries between the physical and the metaphysical. It is through the practice of ritualistic art that the community becomes accessible to the Afro-diasporic daughters featured in this dissertation.

My point of entry into an analysis of these three texts is based on a reassessment of the muted histories of fathers who contribute significantly to female subjectivity, yet have been traditionally relegated to the margins of gender studies and other types of social research. Even today, too many members of the African diaspora are forced to experience fatherhood through absence and loss. Millions of men of African descent are violently ripped from their families as a result of state sponsored violence, war-making, criminalization, and the combined hardship of racism poverty. When black fathers are present daughters are often at a loss. Women are forced to reconcile personal, social, and political histories, with our desire, myth and longing for a “father figure.”

My work privileges texts that depict daughter-protagonists as artists who use their imagination to summon their paternal legacies. In doing so, these texts also connect literary, aural, visual art forms and the ways folk artistic expressions inspire contemporary Afro-diasporic women artists to re-articulate, reinforce, and at times

transgress social conventions.

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INTRODUCTION

Demystifying Paternal Legacies in Contemporary Afro-Diasporic Fiction

In her work on the social significance of absent fathers, Jean Reynolds asserts that “to know one’s father, in a sense, is to know oneself.”¹ My dissertation examines notions related to fathers as symbolic figures, but most importantly, it looks at how fathers in the flesh and blood impact the formation of Afro-diasporic female subjectivities. Fathers, more so than mothers, have often been associated with the notions of absence, indifference, and even violence in the family sphere. Maternity is rarely questioned (as is paternity) and, in many societies, mothers are *expected* to be present. It is not necessarily so for fathers.

Within a variety of contexts in the African diaspora, the problem of paternal absence has been exacerbated by geopolitical forces such as wars, colonialism, slavery, and forced migration. Fathers have often been excused from fulfilling their paternal duties so that they may participate in wars or explore new territories. What does it mean for black female subjectivities when fathers are absent (literally or figuratively) or are made to disappear by geopolitical forces such as African slavery in the Americas or migration to multi-cultural industrial centers? How will their daughters use such paternal legacies to grapple with a sense of self and how they want to exist in the world? Loss and disorientation become part of the configuration of black female identities, expressions of self, and the chronicling of alternate family histories.

¹ Jean Reynolds, “Pygmalion’s” *Word Play: The Postmodern Shaw* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999).

Over the last decade or so, understanding, critiquing, and reclaiming real-life fathers have become increasingly important themes both in the popular press and in academic scholarship. The high volume of self-help books, intended for adult daughters seeking a keener understanding of their relationship with their fathers, is illustrative of a growing interest in understanding this social connection. Feminist literary criticism about daughters and their fathers, while currently scarce, is gradually beginning to engage this topic. However, it remains difficult to find scholarship that moves beyond a focus on *metaphorical* fathers, who are typically made to represent patriarchy broadly rather than patriarchs, individually. In particular, there is a need to look more closely at father-daughter dynamics in literature. Gisela Moffit, author of a book on daughters and fathers in German literature, is convinced that while much research on the family has been conducted in recent years, “daughters and fathers have been [treated like] the step-children of Western empirical research and scholarship.”² This can be easily confirmed and applied to scholarship published in African diaspora studies, African American literary criticism, black feminist thought, and black cultural studies.

Criticism on well-known, Afro-diasporic novels such as Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), Audre Lorde’s *Zami* (1982), Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy* (1990), and Maryse Condé’s *Desirada* (1998), has not yet provided an in-depth analysis of fathers of African descent or what the implications of their presence, absence, absent-presence, or present-absence could signify for the daughter-protagonists.³ My research works

² Gisela Moffit, *Bonds and Bondage: Daughter-Father Relationships in the Memoirs of German-Speaking Women Writers of the 1970’s* (New York: Lang Peter Publishing, Inc., 1993), 5.

³ See for instance, Sarah Wood, “Exorcizing the Past: The Slave Narrative as Historical Fantasy,” *Feminist Review*, 85 (2007): 83-96; AnnLouise Keating, “Making ‘Our Shattered Faces Whole’: The Black Goddess and Audre Lorde’s Revision of Patriarchal Myth,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women*

toward the collective effort of addressing this gap in literary scholarship. It also contributes to the body of literature working better to understand the contours of non-metaphorical, contemporary father-daughter dynamics across cultural boundaries.

Texts of fiction and theory about motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship abound in gender studies. This has been true for texts produced in North America, the Caribbean, and Latin America. In the areas of genealogy and memory studies, the mother has been a particular point of focus for discussing the link between the past and Afro-diasporic female subjectivity. However, in the past few decades, the sheer number of memoirs focusing on individual fathers, and fatherhood has fueled interest in reassessing and reconfiguring fathers in the flesh and blood and individual fathers into both literary and social scholarships.⁴ This project examines the representation of father-daughter dynamics in three Afro-diasporic father-quest narratives. It explicates the correlation between this relationship and contemporary cross-cultural constructions of paternity, masculinity, and Afro-diasporic female subjectivities. In the texts examined in this dissertation, mother figures are present, but are associated with the intimacy of the home rather than the world beyond it. That wider world is associated with fathers, who serve as guides to their daughters on their journey toward knowledge of the world and the self.

Studies, 13(1) (1992): 20-33; Ifeona Fulani, "Gender, Conflict, and Community in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 32(2) (2011): 1-30; and M. Attignol Salvodon, "Conflicting Origins Memory in the Invention of Guadeloupean Genealogy," *Calaloo*, 22(1) (Winter 1999): 249-252.

⁴ See Nancy Miller, *Bequest and Betrayal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Germain Greer, *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You* (London: H. Hamilton, 1989).

The father-daughter dynamic also sheds light on the exchange between male and female subjectivities within the family sphere. Since it occupies the realm of the private and the public simultaneously, the family holds lessons for understanding how particular communities function and how they go about choosing what is valuable and worth transmitting to the next generation. Fathers, traditionally serving as mobile mediators between home and society, exert an important influence over how the daily affairs of the family are conducted. Children notice paternal involvement. So, to view fathers merely as a metaphor for patriarchy is simplistic and perhaps even troubling, perpetuating the mystification of paternal figures and notions of men as tormentors and women as victims. Such one-dimensional and skewed points of view disregard female agency at the same time as they obscure women's occasional complicity with patriarchy. These perspectives lack nuance.

For these reasons I find the argument set forth by Patricia Yaeger and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace's 1989 book, *Refiguring the Father*, compelling. In their introduction to this collection of essays, Yaeger and Kowaleski-Wallace argue that it is not enough that feminist projects thrive on the traditional antagonism between father and daughter. They suggest that, instead, feminist scholars need to consider the ways in which literary and cultural texts have not only "shaped the difficult terms of the daughter-father relationship but [have] also prescribed a role for fathers that is paradoxical and contradictory."⁵ *Refiguring the Father* aims to explore the father figure on a symbolic level, enter into a new dialogue with patriarchy, and move beyond Oedipal and Lacanian views. Yaeger and Kowaleski-Wallace hoped that as a result of

⁵ Patricia Yaeger and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, eds., *Refiguring the Father: New Feminist Readings of Patriarchy* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), x.

this collection of criticism, feminist discourse would be encouraged to find new ways of seeing the father and thus eschew traditional readings of “the father as law, as the gaze, as bodiliness, or as the symbolic, and [thus] develop a new dialectic that refuses to describe the father function as if it were univocal and ahistorical.”⁶ The approaches being questioned by these two scholars reveal the limits of reading father as only patriarchy, and thus reveal a gap in feminist research that needs to be addressed. If current analytical paradigms and methods begin to incorporate perspectives that are more inclusive of the historic and geographic differences among fathers, the multiplicity of symbols associated with father figures within multi-cultural contexts could emerge.

In Afro-diasporic communities of the Caribbean, Latin America, and the United States, father figures tend to be associated with a range of symbols that encapsulate historical memory, migration, multi-locality, loss, dual paternal heritage, and ritualistic storytelling. Since Western feminist criticism tends to conflate fathers with institutions and symbols of oppression, the possibility of creating and analyzing narratives that speak from a wider range of perspectives about fathers has overlooked and the multiplicity of paternal legacies that have been disregarded. The way fathers are understood has a significant bearing upon how women see themselves, the way they experience reality, and their view of others and the world around them. Studying the daughter-father bond is beneficial to understanding the way gender roles are implicated in daily activities as well as in the interpretation of symbolic dimensions of existence.

Cross-cultural analysis of fathers from the perspective of their daughters illuminates the hidden histories of fathers and makes it possible to transcend the

⁶ Yeager and Kowaleski-Wallace, *Refiguring the Father*, xi.

stereotypically negative images that have often accompanied literary and cultural analysis of fathers. While it is true that the rise in global migration is transforming the way the concept of family is being defined, paternal presence continues to shape women's interpretation of gender roles, family and local histories, as well as their writings within a diasporic context. Carole Boyce-Davies suggests a particular perspective for interpreting black women's writing and existence:

Black women's writing should be read as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing. In cross-cultural, transnational, translocal, diasporic perspectives, this reworking of the grounds of "Black Women's Writing" redefines identity away from exclusion and marginality...Black women's writing/existence, marginalized in terms of majority-minority discourses, within the Euro-American male or female canon or Black male canon...redefines its identity as it re-connects and re-members, brings together black women dis-located by space and time.⁷

Like Boyce-Davies, I am also invested in analytical lenses that permit the understanding of ritualistic art as practices that embrace multiple crossings. Ritualistic art works against the conventional tendency to fix Black women writings within geographic, ethnic, temporal, or national boundaries, or worst, inadvertently promote analysis that only serves to reinforce Euro-American canonical exclusion or Black patriarchal marginalization. Reading Black women ritualistic artistic practices as a series of boundary crossings acknowledges movement across space and time, while simultaneously invoking shared origins, sustaining a sense of connectedness and memory throughout the diaspora. For example, a women writer from Haiti feels that she has access and is welcomed to partake in the discourses produced by her sister in Brazil, the United States, Cuba or Mexico.

⁷ Carole Boyce-Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

With Boyce-Davies's cross-cultural message in mind, I summon the space of the Middle passage, which simultaneously represents a moment of crossing *and* connection. It is in this space of crossing the Atlantic that people from the various tribes and regions of Africa were first forced together physically, creating what Boyce-Davies calls "migratory subjectivities."⁸ According to Boyce-Davies, migratory subjectivities are those that traverse multiple boundaries and exist in multiple locations, thus constantly negotiating and renegotiating identities. Boyce-Davies advocates a type of multilocal and multivocal lens when she reminds her readers that: "there are Black women writers everywhere." If this is so, a translocal perspective of women's artistic texts and practices evokes a sense of solidarity across a range of boundaries while it also summons a "consciousness of expansiveness and the dialogics of movement and community."⁹

Thus, Black women's literature may be read with the type of expansive and inclusive consciousness that allows readers to see the experience inscribed and expressed as belonging to the realm of the human experience as a whole. These ideas from Boyce-Davies shed light on how, for example, one of the iconographic Haitian Voodoo loas, Papa Legba can be understood as a universal rather than national figure. He is the spiritual presence invoked at the beginning of Voodoo ceremonies. Papa Legba is the cosmic gatekeeper, master of crossroads, and mediating presence between humans and heavenly beings. Papa Legba is also synchronized with the Catholic figures of Saint Anthony, Saint Lazarus, and Saint Peter. Those in the Yoruba diaspora (communities in Brazil, Cuba and Haiti) call him by a range of names,

⁸ Boyce-Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, 4.

⁹ Boyce-Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, 4.

including Exu, Exu Elegua, Esu Elegbara, Eshu Elegbara, Elegba, Legba, and Eleda. For daughters in the African diaspora, Papa Legba can serve as a spiritual father figure, who mediates paternal loss and yearning. By invoking Papa Legba, daughter-artists can express their yearning to recover, un-silence, and reconnect with paternal stories and legacies from which they have been forcibly dis-located by space and time. These separations and dislocations began during the crossing of the borderless space of the Atlantic, thus giving birth to the migratory subjectivities that characterize many in the African diaspora.

Within the context of the African diaspora, the historical aftermaths of the trans-Atlantic trade and slavery play an integral role in any discourse on fathers. Hortense Spillers, in her much cited essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” explores how race, gender, and family relationships were shaped by the physical space of the Middle Passage and eventually by the plantation.¹⁰ The daughter-father relationship featured in fiction by black women writers tends to move beyond dialectics while reevaluating those important originary moments and spaces of African diasporic subjectivity. In reading their relationship to their fathers, African diasporic daughters must simultaneously contend with what Spillers calls the “mocking” presence of a master/captor father as well as the loss of an African father.¹¹ This dilemma is rooted in the reality of inheriting biracial paternal lineages. A person’s paternal lineage could include a slave forefather in one generation, then a master forefather in the next, and so forth. I have noted that in fiction about daughters and

¹⁰ Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17(2) (Summer 1987): 64-81.

¹¹ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 80.

their fathers, women use inherited wisdom and a range of cultural practices as tools to reconcile the paradoxical situation of biracial paternal lineages. Although I acknowledge that this idea is not always addressed in black fiction in which the father-daughter dyad appears, I argue that Afro-diasporic writers are interested in how paternal influences, involvement, neglect, and apathy contribute to women's journeys toward greater self-awareness and the reclamation of, what Kelly Oliver terms, women's "psychic space."¹²

Joan Riley's 1985 novel *The Unbelonging* depicts the early struggles and costs of such a journey toward self-awareness.¹³ Summoned by her father to join him in Britain, eleven-year-old Hyacinth leaves Jamaica and finds herself learning to confront a new reality fraught with a sense of displacement exacerbated by her father's abuse and racist treatment at school. In *The Unbelonging*, paternal presence represents a threat to the young daughter's nascent sexuality: rather than being a source of support, her father attempts to rape her. Hyacinth's brief time of having a father in her life is marked by danger and fear. He is not redeemed when the novel comes to a close. Their situation represents the dark side of the relationship between fathers and daughters.

In *The Unbelonging*, Riley deliberately explores the more sinister side of the father-daughter dyad, a subject that garnered much attention among social researchers, literary critics, and other scholars in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A social worker in Britain, Riley used her novel as a means of speaking about the need to heal fractured childhood. Riley was convinced that this issue was especially prevalent among West Indian immigrant families living in England, but today, the father-daughter relationship

¹² Kelly Oliver, *The Colonization of Psychic Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

¹³ Joan Riley, *The Unbelonging* (London: Women's Press Ltd., 1985).

is being revisited and reassessed by contemporary black women writers and intellectuals interested in exploring the *positive* dimensions of this connection.

For example, both Gayl Jones and Alice Walker explore pain and trauma inflicted on daughters by fathers in their earlier fiction, such as Gayl Jones's 1975 novel *Corregidora* and Alice Walker's acclaimed epistolary novel, *The Color Purple* (1982). Yet, their later work shifts focus toward the value of positive relationships, forgiveness, and paternal nurturing as in Jones's 1998 novel *The Healing* and Walker's 1998 novel *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. In *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, readers are presented with the story of a family that migrates to a remote location in the sierras of Mexico.¹⁴ Their two daughters, Susannah and Magdalena, experience a relationship with a father who is involved and nurturing. He shapes his daughters's respective journeys toward their unique selves. He is able to do so as an embodiment of a guardian angel whose protection and love for his daughters transcends even his death. Time seems to have transformed these authors's perspective on possible paternal roles.

By the Light of My Father's Smile may be considered part of a greater effort on the part of contemporary artists and scholars to examine the more edifying and transformational aspects of father-daughter relationships.¹⁵ The family unit may be the smallest unit within which a person can begin to experience what it means to belong to a wider network of individuals. Losing—or never having—a key member of that fundamental network has formative repercussions. Paternal loss, its consequences, and the search for belonging have long been and remain of great significance for black

¹⁴ Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1987); Alice Walker, *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (New York: Random House, 1998).

¹⁵ Maryse Condé's *Desirada* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1997) is another example of Afro-diasporic father-quest narratives. In this case the daughter attempts to discover the identity of her unknown father.

women artists and intellectuals. The work of these authors explores the yearning to be whole and to find balance through the recovery of masculine energy and presence, threatened by slavery and its aftermaths. This yearning sparks the imagination of daughter-artists who seek resources and inspiration in folk representations of fathers as storytellers. Male storytellers in African diaspora literature and folklore are sometimes depicted as archetypal figures. This is the case with figure such as Uncle Remus¹⁶ and the Brazilian *Preto Velhos*.¹⁷ These paternal storytellers, creative and crafty, are frequently associated with the spirit of wisdom. Through their stories, these figures transmit strategies for living to their audience. For daughters in the African diaspora, the father has remained a rare (and perhaps a complicated) figure, having been disappeared by the colonial and slavery complex. Since crossing the Atlantic and arriving in a new land where people are bought and sold had signaled a transformation of African family units, the paternal story took on a new character in the New World. The new family structure under slavery produced a fragile maternal link and a virtually non-existent paternal one.

To ensure the institutionalization of a tenuous family structure for slaves, certain measures were taken. For example, the maxim of civil law (*partus sequitur ventrem*) guaranteed that the condition of the slave mother would forever be passed on to all her remotest posterity. Spillers, in her examination of texts by William Goodell and Frederick Douglass on this topic, notes that this matrilineal descent and identity was

¹⁶ Fictional story teller created by Joel Chandler Harris, a Southern journalist for the *Atlanta Constitution*, 1879. Harris published the Brer Rabbit stories in which Uncle Remus shares folktales with children using slave dialect.

¹⁷ Symbolic figure that represents wisdom and the paternal storytelling spirit in Brazilian popular culture. Preto Velhos share stories of African captivity with their “children” or younger slaves living on the plantation.

considered such a degrading mark that it relegated slaves's offspring to the level of the bestial—it "...defines a cultural situation that is 'father-lacking'."¹⁸ This became an endemic dilemma. White patriarchal communities denied African slaves's full humanity through the mother, who represented the only blood-kin slaves could possibly claim as their own. In this ambiguous and ever-shifting reality of slavery, "motherhood is not perceived in the prevailing social climate as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance."¹⁹ There is virtually no father to connect the slave to any sort of cultural inheritance. So for contemporary daughters of the diaspora, the paternal story is pock-marked with missing chapters. The reconstruction of these chapters has often required the improvisation and creativity on the part of chroniclers.

Fiction has often been used in this way: to imagine and reconfigure the missing contents of fragmented histories. Daughters and their fathers represent a social relationship worthy of examination from a literary point of view. This relationship speaks volumes on the nature of Afro-diasporic female subjectivities and the role that men play in the development of women's worldview, values, career choices, and, more importantly, on their relationships.

As a socially constructed figure, the father continues to fascinate. The father is multi-dimensional and is not merely a representative of patriarchy, but is also a reflection of how society loves, disciplines, and protects women. In her photo-essay book, *Daughters of Men: Portraits of African-American Women and Their Fathers*, Rachel Vassel provides readers with a collection of compelling personal narratives that suggest that some contemporary women attribute their success to the presences of

¹⁸ Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 80.

¹⁹ Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 80.

positive father figures in their lives.²⁰ Vassel's text underscores the value of nurturing fathers for the psychic, creative, and social lives of their daughters. Non-scholarly texts like Vassel's inspire Afro-diasporic women writers of fiction to improvise new myths and archetypes to complement knowledge about the trope of a lost African father. Whether they are present, absent, abject, or negligent in carrying out their roles, fathers have a powerful impact in shaping the daughters's subjectivity. In order to move beyond symbolism, and thus understand the various consequences of paternal influence on women's lives, it becomes necessary to analyze fathers's connection to the communal dimension of self and their influence on the type of artistic expressions women choose to cultivate.

Women's mobility, their ability to be their own activists as well as their desire to claim agency in matters of importance are deeply affected by their relationship to their fathers. As discussed earlier, the father bridges hearth and the world beyond. For daughters in the Americas, fathers of African descent are associated with the images of men who were often forbidden to travel too far from the plantation. Claiming subjectivity for slave men often translated into the ability to physically escape from slavery. Thus, part of the paternal story for slaves is linked to movement, agency, and resistance (by running away---*maroonage*²¹). Yet the end result of the journey to freedom did not always guarantee the type of fulfillment runaway slaves imagined. Such a risk was often accompanied by a sense of disorientation and disconnection to kin and familiar places. As Katherine McKittrick proposes, "the production of black spaces

²⁰ Rachel Vassel, *Daughters of Men: Portraits of African American Women and Their Fathers* (New York: Amistad Press, 2007). See also, Carol Ross, *Pop: A Celebration of Black Fatherhood* (New York: Stewart, Tabori, and Chang, 2007).

²¹ Meaning "flight" in the French-Caribbean context.

in the diaspora is tied to locations that were and are explicitly produced in conjunction with race, captivity, and economic profit. Traditional geographies required (and arguably still do) black displacement, black placelessness, and a black population that submissively stayed in ‘place’.²² Defying slavery’s demand that they remain in place, diasporic African fathers sacrificed to protect their ability to be mobile and cross boundaries.

Not only do Afro-diasporic paternal legacies carry with them the privilege of geographical mobility, they also have a significant influence on the types of relationships women establish with their bodies, spirits, and communities. In the United States today, social debates about the importance of nurturing fathers abound in speeches and informal conversations. Some believe children reared without fathers are likely to show deficits not only in their social and sexual development, but also in their moral and cognitive development.²³ Even adults who are currently healthy and successful in their lives may lament—as did President Barack Obama in his 2009 Father’s Day speech—that “the hole a man leaves behind when he abandons his responsibility to his children is one that no government can fill.”²⁴ This assertion underscores the fact that contemporary societies may benefit from consistently acknowledging fathers who have positive and nurturing relationships with their children.

²² Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2006), 9.

²³ Anthony Stevens, *Archetypes: A Natural History of the Self* (London: Routledge, 1985), 118.

²⁴ In a Father’s Day 2009 weekend message, the President encouraged the young boys in the audience to be involved in the lives of their children when they become adults and also reminded them that being a father “isn’t an obligation...[it is] a privilege.” (Ben Feller, “Obama Father’s Day Message: Dads Need to Step Up.” In *Huffington Post Politics*. Accessed April 26, 2011. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/18/obama-fathers-day-message_n_217561.html)

Unfortunately, fathers in contemporary societies have been pushed deeper into the periphery of family life, at least in part due to the perpetuation of negative images of paternal involvement.²⁵ This is especially true in discussion of the father-daughter connection. While incest is certainly and unfortunately a possible element in this relationship, concerns over incest have unfairly dominated discussions of this dyad. This is clearly illustrated both in the fiction and non-fiction published over the past twenty years. Fortunately the issue of incest has not overshadowed women's desire to explore and discuss other equally relevant dimensions of their relationships with their fathers. This fact is made patent in texts published in the past few decades: *Voies des Pères, Voix de Fille: Quinze Femmes Écrivains Parlent de Leurs Pères*, *Animus Aeternus: Exploring the Inner Masculine*, and *The Father-Daughter Plot: Japanese Literary Women and the Law of the Father*, to name a few.²⁶ According to Ursula Owens in *Fathers: Reflections by Daughters*, feminists have taken two primary approaches to writing about the father-daughter bond. The first angle is psychoanalytic, focusing on the sexual bonds between fathers and daughters. The second perspective emphasizes patriarchy. Both points of view are centered on the oppression of women within the nuclear family or their societies. However, Owens suggests one path that could lead to more liberating and positive readings of father-daughter connections: she posits that women's relationship with their father should be viewed only as the first

²⁵ In the 1950s, laws denied financial support to children in need if fathers were present in the home. These policies were reversed in 1994.

²⁶ Adine Sagalyn, ed, *Voies des Pères, Voix de Fille: Quinze Femmes Écrivains Parlent de Leurs Pères* (Paris: Maren Sell, 1988); Deldon Anne McNeely, *Animus Aeternus: Exploring the Inner Masculine* (Toronto, ON: Inner City Books, 1991); Rebecca L. Copeland, *The Father-Daughter Plot: Japanese Literary Women and the Law of the Father* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001).

point of contact with patriarchy.²⁷ Feminist intellectuals should make an effort to move beyond this first point of contact.

Extending Owens's argument, I propose that fathers are often more than a mere point of contact with patriarchy. Fathers connect women to a range of social institutions and discourses, functioning more like objects that mediate physical spaces: bridges, windows, and thresholds. The paternal figure is connected to notions of mobility, travel, and agency—they have the ability to cross cultural and geographic boundaries. So the father-daughter relationship within Afro-diasporic contexts inspires analysis of the connection between physical space and psychic space.

The correlation between these two realms (physical and psychic) leads to the following questions: How do fathers in the African diaspora influence the configuration and colonization of the “psychic space” of their daughters? What does a cross-cultural examination of fathering reveal about the choices daughters make when creating alternate family genealogies, myths, and memories? In the three father-focused narratives examined in this dissertation, the re-assessment of paternal legacies is deployed through the appropriation of vernacular forms, such as regionally specific legends, songs, and a range of other forms of storytelling. Daughterly creative impulses are critically influenced by the weight of paternal loss, indifference, and violence. As these fictional daughter-protagonists work to understand their origins and reconfigure their family histories, grasping their paternal legacies becomes a vital prerequisite to the pursuit of personal well-being and a greater awareness of self, family, and community. The way fathering is experienced by these female protagonists directly impacts the

²⁷ Ursula Owens, ed., *Fathers: Reflections by Daughters* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), x.

ways they choose to wrestle with, interpret, reconfigure, and ultimately transcend traumatic familial and cultural legacies.

Familial and cultural legacies within the context of the African diaspora are at the epicenter of these three novels: Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*, Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, and Marilene Felinto's *The Women of Tijucopapo*.²⁸ Each daughter-protagonist shares a story involving a quest for self that is intimately linked to paternal histories and communally oriented artistic forms. Danticat's protagonist, Ka, is a sculptor whose art is motivated by her respect and love for her father, a former *Tonton Macoute*. Ka's relationship with her father revolves around a storytelling ritual with deep connections to African and Haitian cosmo-vision.²⁹ Jones's Ursa composes and sings blues music as a way of unraveling, making meaning, and reclaiming a traumatic paternal legacy (the psychically burdensome legacy of her Portuguese master-forefather has been transmitted to her through a ritualized storytelling). Felinto's heroine, Rísia, uses song, poetry, and hand-drawn illustrations of landscapes as a means of searching for happiness, overcoming loss, and inciting her own kind of revolution. To make peace with her miserable childhood and the profound anger she feels toward her father, Rísia embarks on an imaginative pilgrimage to the mythical homeland of her foremothers. As she approaches her destination, she honors the legendary figures and landscapes of the Brazilian backlands.

²⁸ Edwidge Danticat, *The Dew Breaker* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004); Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*; Marilene Felinto, *The Women of Tijucopapo*, trans. Irene Matthews (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994). Originally published in 1982 in Portuguese as *As Mulheres de Tijucopapo*.

²⁹ "Tonton Macoutes" were François and Jean Claude Duvalier's personal militia. These unpaid volunteers were used to maintain Duvaliers's iron grip on the Haitian people. In exchange for their loyalty and service, the Macoutes were given a virtual license to torture, kill, and extort. Haitian folklore portrays the Tonton Macoute as a boogeyman who kidnaps naughty children during the night and places them in his knapsack.

Each daughter-protagonist uses distinctive art forms to create rituals that speak back to their paternal histories and engage their vernacular cultures. The product of their creative processes is what I call ritualistic art: any folk art form (storytelling, sculpting, music, dancing, folk medicine, traditional cuisine, etc.) that individuals use to achieve healing and transcendence, liberate muted histories, honor their spatial environments, and re-integrate themselves into their communities. Ritualistic art is an interactive, polysemic, and dynamic creative form of expression that performs a transformative function in the life of the individual. Ritualistic art honors folk wisdom and folk forms. It marries the individual to the community, so it is multi-vocal; it links the “here” and the “there,” so it is trans-local; and it benefits from the conflation of generations over time, so it is multi-temporal. Ritualistic art is critical for understanding the distinct father-daughter relationship as experienced by daughter-artists of the African diaspora and as depicted in each of the three novels examined in this dissertation.

In all three texts, the father-daughter relationship is depicted as a connection that is primarily held together by participation in familial as well as social rituals, such as storytelling. I contend that within the context of the African diaspora, these rituals employ vernacular forms closely associated with myths, dreams, and archetypal figures. Psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and James Hillman have extensively studied these psychic elements.³⁰ Jung’s theories on the function of archetypes and his

³⁰ See Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Karen Gibson, *Carl Jung and Soul Psychology* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1991); Violet S. de Laszlo, ed., *Psyche and Symbol: A Selection from the Writings of C.G. Jung*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); and James Hillman, *Healing Fiction* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1983).

concept of the collective unconscious are especially relevant to understanding how ritualistic art informs the father-daughter relationships represented in the three novels I analyze. The myths, legends, and dreams in the texts under examination illuminate the process by which Afro-diasporic daughters go about configuring identities that honor and are rooted in communal legacies. In Afro-diasporic contexts, art, myth, dreams, and archetypes constitute the language with which family histories are examined and decoded. They are efficacious tools that help navigate the psychic landscape of daughter-artists.

I use Jungian theory to explore the archetypal relationships that appear in the personal stories of daughter-protagonists. These narratives feature daughters who use artistic forms to make meaning out of their paternal, and, by association, communal legacies. Jung describes archetypes as the structures of the unconscious from which emerge not only the images that provoke the instincts, but also those of dreams and fantasies.³¹ Archetypes condition the protagonist's responses and often prompt the main character to take action. Thomas T. Lawson describes the relationship Jung established between archetypes and behavior:

Jung postulates that the primary regulators of the daily behavior of both individuals and societies are the archetypes. Our attention is galvanized, our thoughts organized, our motives prompted by ideas and images that spring from them. But he goes further to say these ideas and images are the product of humanity's ancestral experience.³²

Jung's psychoanalytic theories shed light on the dream and fantasy sequences that appear in the texts under discussion and also clarify the archetypes that populate these works of fiction. The reader encounters familiar archetypal structures such as the

³¹Stevens, *Archetypes*, 44-45.

³²Thomas T. Lawson, *Carl Jung, Darwin of the Mind* (London: Karnac Books, Ltd., 2008), 98-99.

hunter and prey in *The Dew Breaker*, the master and female slave concubine in *Corregidora*, and the ambulant poet and changing audiences and landscapes in *The Women of Tijuapapo*. These patterns encapsulate local and collective memory as experienced by each respective daughter-protagonist. I argue that they also link the individual directly to the community. While symbols found in dreams, legend, and archetypal elements may be stored in the collective unconscious, I propose that it is through the ritualized process of storytelling that they are animated. Symbolic images originate from our psychic landscape and are manifested as part of our everyday, experienced landscape. Art effectively articulates the wisdom imprinted on those landscapes making it possible for them to be shared and understood by others. Jung's studies on the realm of the unconscious are critical to understanding the elements that inform the types of art the daughter-protagonists create.

As I analyzed the implications of the range of art represented in the three texts examined in this dissertation, I have noted that the idea of the collective unconscious illustrates the way certain ideas, images, and rituals become marked by particular communal practices. The ritualistic process that links all three novels is storytelling. The storytelling process for Ursa's family adapts metaphors associated with delivering justice, whereas in Ka's family, storytelling is closely connected to ideas of redemption and the afterlife. In the stories that Rísia's father shares with her, justice and redemption are premised on the possibility of escaping the misery of the here-and-now. These three narratives illustrate that it is the paternal figure of each family who determines the direction that each respective storytelling ritual takes. In this way,

fathers serve as mediators between the familial act of storytelling and the ones who sometimes introduce the symbols and beliefs cherished by the local community.

The ritualized and artistic interactions that daughters have with their fathers (such as storytelling, sculpting, etc.) are examples of the many ways that the community becomes accessible to daughters. Some psychoanalysts believe that the most important part of paternal function in children's infancy is to foster union between mothers and children if the fathers's feminine side is sufficiently evolved.³³ If this side is not evolved, then the father fosters resentment in the family. According to Deldon A. McNeely, fathers are responsible for a second birth: the psychic separation of children from their mothers. By moving away from the first self they discovered, children begin the earliest phase of self-recognition. This recognition later leads to independence and to a first encounter with what I call the communal self. The communal self is activated by a symbolic move from mother to father, and then from father to community. This step toward independence is accompanied by the desire to move beyond the mother's breasts, which are symbolic of the familiar realm of the home. This step forward incidentally leads the individual to the "father's breasts"³⁴ and the mysterious worlds he mediates. When fathers are present and involved in childrearing, children are able to access the communal dimension of themselves thanks to what McNeely describes as a "gentle midwifing."³⁵ Ideally, as a result of this process, children learn that they belong to a family that extends beyond the physical realm of the home and that they belong to a specific type of community.

³³ McNeely, *Animus Aeternus*, 104.

³⁴ See Sharon Olds's poem "My Father's Breasts" in *The Dead and The Living* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 43.

³⁵ McNeely, *Animus Aeternus*, 104.

As is demonstrated in each text analyzed, community implies a connection that extends beyond current human members of the surrounding native space. To put it another way, community includes elements from a person's physical surroundings. I contend that physical landscapes, just as extended family, nourish a person's psychic landscape and therefore deploy a function for the subject that is as equally significant as contact with human members of the community. In the texts studied in this dissertation, I also highlight the fact that embracing the communal self demands integration within a broader network of individuals and landscapes.

In *Praisesong for the Widow* Paule Marshall theorizes a concept of community that aptly illustrates the communal self.³⁶ Marshall describes individual identity as essentially rooted in connections with members and spaces linked to the broader community. Marshall amplifies her definition of community by extending kinship even to people who would typically be considered mere strangers to the protagonist. The communal self imparts a sense of wholeness and balance to the subject; is nurtured by interconnections between individual and community, here and there, the present, past, and future; and represents the acceptance that individuals can best overcome adversity and thrive by remaining connected to communal energies and perspectives. This concept of the communal self is aptly depicted when the main character of *Praisesong*, Avey Johnson, has an uncanny experience as she waits to board a ship. At that moment in the novel, Avey suddenly becomes keenly aware of her connections to people around her. Avey is convinced that she sees fine, almost invisible, silk-like strings, projecting

³⁶ Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (New York: Dutton, 1983).

from the bodies of everyone around her. These strings meet at a single point in her own body: her heart.

She would feel what seemed to be hundreds of slender threads streaming out from her navel and from the place where her heart was to enter those around her. And threads went out not only from people she recognized but to those she didn't know as well... Then it would seem to her that she had it all wrong and the threads didn't come from her, but from them, from everyone on the pier... while the impression lasted she would cease being herself... she became part of, indeed the center of, a huge wide confraternity.³⁷

In Marshall's texts confraternity is translated into an image of communal connection akin to a multi-pronged umbilical cord streaming from all those by whom one is surrounded. Avey's epiphany shows her the connections between the seemingly unrelated individuals of the community to her own body, to her deepest self. This moment evokes a net-like image that symbolizes the concept of diaspora, the process of dispersal. Avey's epiphany, then, underscores how the road that leads outward also leads inward—the reverse of diasporic dispersal—re-connection. Unlike the images that the concept of diaspora—the radiation outward of culture from one location, in this case, Africa—the metaphor of the umbilical cord creates a reverse image in which forces are being drawn inward toward the subject being fed and nurtured from various sources in its surroundings. This is a powerful metaphor, because it conflates the maternal and the paternal. In other words, the metaphor of the umbilical cord reveals how female subjects become connected to and are fed by the community via nurturing relationships with their fathers.

³⁷ Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow*, 190-191.

This metaphor is clearly illustrated when Ka in *The Dew Breaker* discovers that she is part of a broader network of individuals. Danticat unites a multiplicity of seemingly unrelated voices and configures for Ka an extended family by connecting her to members of a community of Haitian immigrants living in New York. Ka's subject and inspiration as a wood-carver is her father, but she is completely oblivious to the way her craft connects to a strong tradition of Haitian wood-carving. Haitian readers may realize that Ka is summoning one of the many artistic languages of her father's homeland. Woodcarving, a preferred medium for Haitian sculptors, incorporates elements from the environment and the surrounding landscape. Looking at this sculpting through an African cosmological lens, the artist transforms part of a tree from one form to another. Yet the essence and life-force of the tree has not been lost. It has been transmitted into another shape or into another capsule, but continues to be filled with nature's energy. Within the African diaspora, trees have often been associated with the presence or spirit of ancestral figures and healing.³⁸ Acknowledging the spiritual value of trees parallels the ecological perspective that people are to care for and be good stewards of all living things. Embracing the communal self can mean an acceptance and respect for the nonhuman members of the planet. Thus, the concept of the communal self is mindful of the ecological dimensions of Afro-diasporic subjectivities. Ka's community tangibly includes the physical world.

Both *The Dew Breaker* and *The Women of Tijucopapo* illustrate the importance of the ecological dimensions of the communal self. The communal self is sensitive to

³⁸ See Stephanie Rose Bird, *A Healing Grove: African Tree Remedies and Rituals for the Body and Spirit* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, Inc., 2009).

the energies exerted by the physical landscape on which community activities take place. Ecological forces shape economic and social conditions, which in turn have a significant impact on the quality of family relationships. In Felinto's novel, ecological pressures lead to forced migration from the Northeast to metropolitan centers of Brazil. Members of any diasporic community understand that forced migration often signifies the separation of family units and that the father is often the first to traverse geographical boundaries in search of a better life for his family.

The environment and physical landscape has also been figured as a type of protagonist in African diasporic cosmology, myth, and lore. I find the argument set forth by Sylvia Mayer in *Restoring the Connection to the Natural World* (2003) relevant to the ecological dimension of black subjectivity in general and black female subjectivity in particular. Mayer uses perspectives from bell hooks's 1999 essay "Touching the Earth" to argue against the mentality that there is no correlation between the struggle for collective black self-recovery and ecological movements. Both Mayer and hooks remind their readers that many African Americans have a legacy of close relationship to the land: despite the fact that they were "exploited as inexpensive labor force in the economic systems of slavery and sharecropping... many black Southerners still developed meaningful, not only physical, but also spiritual life sustaining relationships with the land they were cultivating."³⁹ This life-affirming connection between self and nonhuman members of the community is precisely why certain landscapes have been cherished as sacred elements for family ritualistic practices.

³⁹ Sylvia Mayer, *Restoring the Connection to the Natural World: Essays on the African American Environmental Imagination* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 1.

Once again, *Praisesong for the Widow* is a good example. It, too, highlights the important effects the physical landscape has on daughterly psychic space. As a child, the protagonist, Avey religiously visited her great aunt in a space that is regarded as sacred to their family. This space is imbued with the spirit of their Gullah ancestors who, long ago, were brought to the Low-country region of South Carolina and Georgia. More than any other African American community, the Gullah have preserved African linguistic and cultural heritage. They preserve uplifting cultural traditions and continue to honor important family legacies.

Similarly, to reclaim a cultural heritage that she feels her mother has spurned and practically forgotten, Felinto's Rísia feels compelled to take a pilgrimage back to mythical place of Tijucopapo. Tijucopapo is where Rísia enters a land of family and Brazilian legend. In that imaginative landscape, she is empowered to configure an alternate family genealogy. Consequently, journeying back to this legendary space represents the beginning of Rísia's fulfillment and self-determination. As Rísia's narrative illustrates, it is in such spaces of intense ancestral significance that daughters find the power to reconfigure their identities and embrace a more holistic self. Ancestrally important spaces restore strength to Afro-diasporic individuals who may feel psychically fragmented. So armed, they may feel driven to continue struggling for a more balanced perspective of self and experience catharsis from the traumas of the past.

Therefore, healing can be found when one reaches for a reconnection with spaces that are sacred to one's family and community. For many members of the diaspora, a sense of place, space, and the environment have long been considered key

components in the construction of identity. On the other hand, there are segments of the African diaspora that show a reluctance to accept the benefits an ecological perspective in their analysis of diasporic subjectivity. This ecological approach is often viewed as closely associated with the concerns of white, middle-class individuals. Although traditional readings of diaspora literature rarely take ecological and environmental perspectives, these perspectives are useful lenses for considering the ways that space and place shape Afro-diasporic identities. As Mayer and bell hooks show, modern society has

a tendency to see no correlation between the struggle for collective black self-recovery and ecological movements that seek to restore balance to the planet by changing our relationship to nature and to natural resources. Unmindful of our history of living harmoniously on the land, many contemporary black folks see no value in supporting ecological movements, or see ecology and the struggle to end racism as competing concerns. Recalling the legacy of our ancestors who knew that the way we regard the land and nature will determine the level of our self-regard, black people must reclaim a spiritual legacy where we connect our well-being to the well-being of the earth. This is a necessary dimension of healing.⁴⁰

According to hooks, to transcend the legacies of injustice, trauma, and dehumanization, Afro-diasporic people must honor the nonhuman dimensions of community and express reverence for their ancestors. For Afro-diasporic peoples, the development of subjectivity and a personal worldview are often premised on the reverence of one's physical environment and elders of the community. This ethos that integrates the veneration of ancestors or other timeless people has traditionally been considered one of the hallmarks of black art. The paternal-conscious art created by the daughter-

⁴⁰ bell hooks, "Touching the Earth," in *At Home on the Earth: Becoming Native to Our Place A Multicultural Anthology*, ed. David Landis Barnhill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 51-56.

protagonist of each of the three texts analyzed in this dissertation incorporates these two pillars of identity and artistic expression. Morrison is especially interested in what black writers do with the presence of an ancestor and how this presence or absence influences the protagonist's identity and destiny:

What struck me in looking at some contemporary fiction was that whether the novel took place in the city or in the country, the presence or absence of that figure determined the success or the happiness of the character. It was the absence of an ancestor that was frightening, that was threatening, and it caused huge destruction and disarray in the work itself.⁴¹

The very presence of a figure connected to the past has real consequences for the characters featured in most black contemporary fiction. Morrison observes that even the *absence* of such a figure affects the very structure of the text.

While Morrison in her own fiction tends to feature and underscore the significance of female ancestors,⁴² I would like to highlight the importance of ancestral paternal figures by focusing on their role as storytellers and how storytelling is a passage into new realms of self-awareness for their daughters. The process of embracing the communal self through storytelling functions much like a boomerang: fathers introduce their daughters to the world of science, religion, art, politics, etc. Daughters then respond by creating ritualistic art that echoes community-specific histories, myths, and cosmologies, but that also speaks back to their fathers. In this process, paternal and daughterly roles reinforce each other.

⁴¹ Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor As Foundation," in *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 2289.

⁴² See Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1987) and *Song of Solomon* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1977).

Rituals themselves function as vehicles for storytelling. Benjamin Ray, a religious studies scholar, proposes that “the performative power of ritual language [is] its ability to rearrange people’s feeling and command psychological forces to make things happen in people’s lives.”⁴³ This power is especially relevant to understanding the process by which African diasporic histories and practices are transmitted across generations. The transmission of collective histories in the diaspora has traditionally reflected the significances of orality. This process of chronicling and transmitting histories occurs through the performance of certain rituals such as voodoo ceremonies, Johnkankus,⁴⁴ Juneteenth celebrations, and ancestral commemorating rites. These collective rituals all perform a storytelling function that incorporates other artistic forms, such as dance, song, and painting. Unlike the fragile pages of a history book, rituals as a storytelling medium cannot be easily burned or torn out of existence and they can be inconspicuously carried across geographical boundaries. Rituals make possible the transmission of family histories and communal values through the dramatization of specific information. In the context of the African diaspora, rituals are interactive ways of re-connecting with the past and the ancestors. Afro-diasporic memory itself, full of gaps and blank pages, parallels the limitations of current feminist discussion and meditations on the paternal function. Analyzing the paternal figure

⁴³ Kevin Schilbrack, *Thinking through Rituals: Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 5.

⁴⁴ This is a popular celebration from the time of slavery that would take place in the Southern Coast of the United States, notably Wilmington, Edenton, and Hillsboro, North Carolina. At the time it was one of the most popular musical event for the entire community, both black and white. It is believed that these festivities were held in honor of an ancient African chief. In celebrating Johnkankus, various communities were continuing an African folk tradition while simultaneously creating one of the first African-American vernacular traditions. Johnkankus has last for the past two hundred and seventy six years in certain locations. (Irene Smalls, “Roots of an African-American Christmas Tradition” in *The Black Collegian*, accessed November 10, 2011, <http://www.black-collegian.com/african/johnkankus1299.shtml>)

through the familiar realms of art and rituals brings this important figure into clearer focus, making an elusive subject, perhaps, less so.

Given that ritualistic art is a critical part of my analysis, I incorporate insights gained from scholars on the role of art and ritual such as bell hooks, Ladelle McWhorter, Kevin Schilbrack, and Laurence Coupe.⁴⁵ These cultural critics have conducted studies that support the idea that within the past few decades, Western societies have been reassessing the usefulness of rituals. The reclamation of ritual has become part of a collective search for wholeness and reinforced the current emphasis on holistic living. Rituals are no longer hastily disregarded as primitive and passé, but are being rediscovered, revamped, and readopted for their ability to help contemporary individuals find healing, a deeper sense of self-awareness, and more meaningful connections to their local communities and histories. Part of this search for wholeness has included, for many individuals, a desire to make peace with conflicted paternal histories. In the three novels examined, daughters use their art as ritual for speaking back to paternal legacies. The ritualistic art the daughter-protagonists produce is intimately tied to their communal self and imbued with energies that transcend the individual.

As hooks suggests in “An Aesthetics of Blackness,” art has always performed a psychological, social, political, and spiritual function for enslaved Africans and their descendents.⁴⁶ She argues that this is why people must learn to carefully *see* artistic

⁴⁵ Ladelle McWhorter, “Rites of Passing: Foucault, Power, and Same-Sex Commitment Ceremonies,” in *Thinking through Rituals: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Kevin Schilbrack (New York: Routledge, 2004), 72-96. Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁴⁶ bell hooks, “An Aesthetics of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional,” in *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 121-134.

objects. In other words, hooks urges her readers to adopt new ways of seeing, perceiving, and interpreting art: “objects are not without spirit. They touch us in unimaginable ways.” Consequently, fiction in which the protagonist is an artist will invariably be marked by community-specific ways of *seeing*, knowing, and creating meaning.

Art created in *The Dew Breaker*, *Corregidora*, and *The Women of Tijuapapo* represents the type of ritualistic art that performs psychological functions. The ritualistic art one encounters in each of these three texts places daughters in dialogue with their paternal legacies. It is through the creation of ritualistic art that, in a sense speaks back to their paternal legacies, that daughters find the inspiration and the drive to seek healing, transformation. From their search they emerge with a greater sense of self-awareness, agency, and a keen desire to be free from the weight of the past. Fiction that includes ritualistic art employs fantasy, myth, totems, symbols, and archetypes as a means of creating a space within which the past and present can interact. Having noted these psychological ingredients of ritualistic art, I find Jungian theory fitting and insightful in my examination of their depiction in the art created by daughter-artists. According to Jung, the collective unconscious is inherited, not acquired.⁴⁷ So, the collective memory of particular communities within the diaspora is constituted by these “permanent eternal patterns of understanding.”⁴⁸ Rituals built upon imagery connected to ancestral figures are a means through which African diasporic memory survives and a sense of kinship is

⁴⁷ Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (London and New York: Arkana 1990), 64.

⁴⁸ Coupe, *Myth*, 131.

constructed. Jung proposes that our psychic inheritance, based upon archetypes, represents the residue of the experiences of our ancestor through the generations.⁴⁹

In this dissertation, I argue that kinship and art mutually reinforce one another in the processes of creative expression. Art uses symbols easily recognized by members of a given community to reinforce the boundaries of collective identity. Kinship is maintained through art and rituals that communicate communal memory and collective values. In both Danticat's and Jones's texts, the main symbols used by daughters in their production of art delineate geographically specific cosmologies and practices. In Felinto's novel, the daughter-protagonist utilizes a range of artistic forms to reconfigure the boundaries of community by creating an alternate and more desirable community. For Rísia, art occupies a ritualistic function that is both integrative of the past and transformational. Ritual in this context works much like Foucault's concept of the "technology of power."⁵⁰ Foucault argues that ritual is a highly versatile tool for imposing hierarchy and order. The daughter-protagonists in the texts analyzed in this project employ ritual as means of organizing and working through memories and understanding folk wisdom, customs, and other types of information about their respective communities.

This idea of ritual as an organizational tool aligns well with Schilbrack's perspective on the importance of the creative process as a mirror of life for the artist.⁵¹ Schilbrack urges students of culture to recognize that human reflection is found not only in writing, but also in other meaningful activities like canoe-making, pottery, basket-

⁴⁹ Lawson, *Carl Jung, Darwin of the Mind*, 31.

⁵⁰ McWhorter, "Rites of Passing," 92.

⁵¹ Schilbrack, *Thinking through Rituals*, 7.

making, weaving, house construction, musical performance, and astronomy, any of which can be taken as a reflective interpretation of the crafter's world. Therefore, activities that can be simultaneously artistic and ritualistic in nature should be seen as "mimetic" in that they involve the creative practice of imaginative understanding.⁵² Ritual art promotes a reflective relationship between the past and the present. Foucault proposes: "new disciplines have no difficulty taking up their place in the old forms."⁵³ While ritualistic practices may dwindle during certain moments in history, they exist in the background until the appropriate time when they can resurface and be put to use. This idea has been illustrated in the history of various nations in the Americas. For instance, after the American occupation of Haiti, a higher number of Haitians showed a keener interest in folk traditions and practices. Vernacular traditions were then considered a means of reclaiming the *essence* of Haitian identity. Before the occupation these same practices were often honored in secret by the masses. Haitians who include vernacular traditions in their daily lives were stigmatized, shamed, and snubbed by those who deemed themselves too educated to pay mind to such "superstitions" and artistic backwardness. With the exception of particular art forms, modern societies have often relegated myth, legends, and ritual to a pre-industrial and pre-scientific era of Western history, but some scholars believe these modes of relating to the self and community continue to be of great significance in the lives of many Western and contemporary individuals.⁵⁴ Still, in a world where scientific reasoning predominates, ritual, in particular, could be seen as unnecessary or irrelevant practices. In "Rites of

⁵² Schilbrack citing William Schweiker, *Thinking through Rituals*, 7.

⁵³ McWhorter, "Rites of Passing," 74.

⁵⁴ McWhorter citing Robert Bocoock, "Rites of Passing," 73.

Passing,” McWhorter speaks to both sides of this argument.⁵⁵ McWhorter sees the conflict as being between those who believe that ritual and religious practices have suffered a decline in proportion to modernization and those who have observed the extent to which modern lives have benefited (or could benefit) from the reclamation of traditional rituals. Modernization has brought forth technologies that connect the world in ways never before imagined, making folk forms, rituals, and beliefs that had previously been marginalized are now more accessible. Rituals are out there for those who want them.

Rituals, I argue, are essential to any diasporic group searching for a means of guarding collective memory as time progresses. For instance, as people who personally experienced slavery or the Jewish Holocaust have diminished in numbers, the ability to personally bear witness to the atrocities of the past are diminished. No physical scars or bodily memory remain to help testify to the collective struggles and experiences of suffering. Yet, rituals are powerful means for physically recalling and commemorating the sacrifices made by the ancestors. In some rituals of commemoration, descendants symbolically become the dead, making it possible for modern individuals to embody the ancestral protagonists of one’s family or communal history. I propose that ritualistic art represents the embodiment of the past, because it is palimpsestic: the past and present can coexist and form complex relationships. It is this coexistence that daughter-artists strive to represent in the process of searching to understand their paternal legacy and, by extension, themselves.

⁵⁵ McWhorter, “Rites of Passing,” 72-74.

In Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*, Jones's *Corregidora*, and Felinto's *The Women of Tijucopapo*, fathers are emblematic of daughters's ability to wield control over traumatic family memory. The protagonist in each narrative embarks on her journey to find a personal language with which to constructively and imaginatively speak back to her father-story. Having accomplished this, each in her own way is able to make accessible the inaccessible, palpable the elusive, and clear the non-revealed.

In this dissertation, I illustrate how, in each novel, the daughter-protagonist creates art that is marked by ideas and practices valued by diverse communities within the diaspora: *The Dew Breaker* focuses on Haiti and the United States, *Corregidora* on Brazil and United States, and *The Women of Tijucopapo* on the Northeastern Brazil. Despite their different geographic settings, all three writers value and explore communal ways of knowing and transmitting information. Father-daughter relationships are held together by ritualistic and artistic modes of expression more than any other connection. What these texts highlight is the ways the creative process can reveal the complex dimensions of the father-daughter story.

In Chapter 1 of the dissertation, "‘Negative Confessions’ of the Father: Un-Masking the Mysterious Ways of the *Loas*," I explore the significance of Ancient Egyptian and Neo-African religious rituals and myths in the lives of contemporary Haitian Americans. Edwidge Danticat, as a Haitian-American writer, grounds her stories on the experiences of immigrants living outside of Haiti. The immigrants represented in her fiction employ Haitian folk wisdom and folk culture to ensure survival in their lives abroad. Consequently, Danticat's characters illustrate that the past is always an integral part of the present.

At the center of *The Dew Breaker* one finds the relationship between an ex-*Tonton Macoute* and his sculptor-daughter, Ka. Danticat also features the voices of the Haitians this ex-*Macoute* victimized during the Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier regime. Storytelling, sculpting, painting, and other ritualistic practices become a means of reintegrating Ka’s family into its Haitian American community and of empowering Ka as a witness to and symbolic spiritual intercessor in her father’s quest for salvation.

Chapter 2, “Liberating the ‘Pages of Hysteria’: Daughters, Healing, and Ritualistic Art,” continues the thread of family, rituals, and art explored in the first chapter. In this instance, however, I use Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* to examine how the great granddaughter of a Brazilian slave-owner wrestles with a haunting legacy. Jones’s novel depicts the layers of complexity that can exist in the ways African female slaves remember their traumatic past. The representation of several layers of the father-daughter story in *Corregidora* is premised on the intergenerational rituals that haunt and tenaciously endure beyond geographical and chronological borders. Like Danticat, Jones is invested in exploring the connections between the present and the psychic trauma of the past. In *Corregidora*, her first novel, which was published as a dissertation project in the late 1970s, Jones focuses on issues that were of concern to African-American intellectuals and activists at the time. Written in stream-of-consciousness style, *Corregidora* examines the psychological and often traumatic results of the legacy of slavery in the Americas. Jones is particularly interested in the experiences of women and families living in various regions of the diaspora. In *Corregidora*, she establishes a link between the experiences of slavery in Brazil and the United States. Blues music, often regarded as a language of pain and a means of

expressing the desire for freedom, takes on narrative dimensions in this novel. The blues are key to the ritualized compositions that Jones's protagonist, Ursa, creates. Storytelling, the re-enactment of archetypal relationships, and performance of the blues become the artistic rituals that articulate violence, trauma, resistance, agency and Ursa's desire to be free. I argue that Spillers's concept of the "mocking" presence of the master/captor father and yearning to recover the lost African father are especially relevant in this story.⁵⁶ As the great granddaughter of a Brazilian slave owner and whoremonger, Simon Corregidora, Ursa composes blues music in her effort to heal the wound of this legacy and the very real consequences of Simon's past on her present-day relationships. In Jones's novel, the blues are intimately linked with the creation and internalization of meaning. It is through her art—blues music—that Ursa organizes her universe.

In Chapter 3, "Configuring an Ecological Self through Northeastern Brazilian Myth and Paternal Memory," I inquire into the ways the father-daughter story in Marilene Felinto's *The Women of Tijucopapo* makes it possible to examine a daughter's relationships to her various *others*. Several ecological elements become part of the art that Rísia creates as in the process of reaching paternal understanding. I also examine how family legends and regional myths travel and transcend local and national borders through folk forms such as the *literatura de cordel* (stories on a string). Like the cordel poet, Rísia uses improvisation to create art during her pilgrimage to the mythical Tijucopapo. In Tijucopapo, Rísia believes she will figure out how to make sense of her contentious relationship with her father, but while Rísia's narrative invokes Spillers

⁵⁶ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80.

concept of “father-lacking,” it also highlights the gifts transmitted from father to daughter.⁵⁷

By remembering her abject and virtually absent father as one who was at his best when creating stories, Rísia comes to terms with her childhood and comes to understand that her relationship to her father motivates her to defy passivity, stasis, and sessility (qualities traditionally associated with women). Through her own brand of ritualistic art, Rísia reconfigures an alternate genealogy for herself and revises popular myths of the Northeast, which incorporate a fusion of Indigenous, Portuguese, and African elements. Rísia’s narrative is a testament to how useful ritualistic art can be in countering loss, trauma, and troubling legacies.

Like Jones, Felinto is a political leftist, interested in feminism and various types of revolution. Felinto tends to focus on the lives of women and the role they play in bringing about change in society. Her thematic interests are deeply rooted in questions of national identity and history. In *The Women of Tijucoapapo*, the exploration of folk forms allows Felinto to articulate what it means to be a modern, educated, and politically conscious Brazilian woman from the Northeast.

Altogether, these three novels tell the stories of women whose lives cross boundaries. By reflecting and echoing the essence of diaspora, these authors speak in multilinguistic ways, revealing the importance of place, nature, collective memory, a sense of belonging, and the ecological dimensions of modern identities. My analysis of Danticat, Jones, and Felinto’s texts illustrates the importance of reappraising and re-appropriating folk traditions. Using an interdisciplinary approach, this dissertation

⁵⁷ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 80.

examines the role that ritualistic art and paternal heritage play in the development of holistic female identities. In these texts, fathers, ranging from the most affectionate to the most dysfunctional, shape the vital connections that their daughters establish with the community. The voice of the community continues to resonate in the histories and legacies transmitted from father to daughter. In this context, the paternal story serves much like a bridge in attaining the communal self (the dimension of the self fashioned by values that are inextricably linked to collective memory, folkways, and vernacular forms). Unlike in conventional Western cultures, in most non-mainstream communities, the individual is almost always defined within the framework of the communal.

The interdisciplinary lens I use in this dissertation is useful in the study of modern subjectivities in fiction by women in the African diaspora. The approach bridges the past and the present, marries the individual and the community, and gives voice to perspectives that have traditionally been marginalized. Looking at the father-daughter relationship in this manner furthers the understanding of how women cultivating their communal selves are empowered to utilize their ritualistic art to articulate the past and shape their futures. In an elemental way, my very approach mirrors the role that I argue fathers play in the lives of Afro-diasporic daughter: This dissertation seeks to bridge literary, aural, and visual art forms.

CHAPTER 1**“Negative Confessions” of the Father: Un-Masking the Mysterious Ways of the *Loas***

In this chapter, I examine the father-daughter relationship as represented in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker* (2004). This text situates this relationship within the context of family dynamics complicated by immigration, violence, traumatic histories, and secrecy. Counteracting these challenges are rituals of healing, art that demystifies the past, and the ritualization of memories through storytelling. The characters in this text reach beyond Haitian cosmology to find the raw materials with which to create personalized rituals that purge and redeem. For example, Egyptian mythology and Asian ceremonial practices are interwoven into the daily practices of the Haitian Americans featured in *The Dew Breaker*. I consider how the persistence of painful memories and guilt can be transformed into relics of the past that may bring healing, forgiveness, and salvation in the present.

The family dynamic within the context of the Haitian diaspora is a recurring theme in many of Danticat’s works, fiction and non-fiction alike. This is not surprising since Danticat’s early childhood was shaped by her parents’ emigration from Haiti to the United States. Danticat’s literary work resonates with many contemporary Haitian Americans because she explores immigration experiences from the perspective of Haitians who have experienced life during the Duvalier era. For some Haitians in the diaspora, Danticat’s writing conjures memories long buried, while for others her

narratives compel a new familiarity with a history their parents have been compelled to keep silent.

Edwidge Danticat (“Edweedj Dantikah”) was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti on January 19, 1969. Danticat learned about estrangement at an early age: she was only two years old when her father emigrated to the United States and four when her mother left to join him. Danticat and her younger brother were left in the care of her father’s brother and his wife in Haiti. At age twelve, Danticat and her brother joined their parents and two new, younger brothers in Brooklyn. In her new home, the family continued to have a strong connection to Haiti, attending a Haitian church and living in a church-owned building. Still, attending high school in New York was a challenge. Danticat remembers being teased because of her accent, imperfect English, and simply for being Haitian at a time when the most prevalent international image of Haiti was that of hordes of refugees arriving on the shores of South Florida, or of a nation laden with the AIDS epidemic. Yet her love of reading led to the publication of her first writings in her high school newspaper. As Danticat began to seriously consider a career as a writer, her family encouraged her to embrace a more practical and less dangerous career. The family remembered too well how Haitian writers and their families were persecuted, pushed into exile or threatened with death during politically volatile moments.

So warned, Danticat instead expanded her reading repertoire. In addition to reading Dickens and other such classic writers assigned in high school, she incorporated texts from the African American and Haitian literary traditions. Later, as a French literature major at Barnard College, Danticat found inspiration in the work of writers

such as Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ntozake Shange, Maryse Condé, and Simone Schwartz-Bart. She persisted, earned her degree, and later enrolled in Brown University's Fine Arts program. Her thesis was partly based on her own experiences as a young Haitian living between two cultures. This manuscript became the basis for her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*.

Breath, Eyes, Memory garnered Danticat much acclaim,⁵⁸ and a year later she became a finalist for the 1995 National Book Award for her collection of short stories, *Krik? Krak!*⁵⁹ About three years later, she published *The Farming of Bones*, a historical novel that commemorates the 1937 massacre of Haitian immigrants on the border of Haiti and the Dominican Republic.⁶⁰ Danticat has received a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Foundation grant, and *Granta* named her one of twenty "Best Young American Novelists" in 1996.

Critics and fellow writers have praised Danticat both as a powerful storyteller and literary stylist. Dominican American writer Julia Alvarez describes *Breath, Eyes, Memory* as a coming-of-age novel "written in prose clear as a bell, magical as a butterfly and resonant as drum talk."⁶¹ Paule Marshall declares that Danticat's stories in *Krik? Krak!* are "spare, luminous stories that read like poems."⁶² And in its review of *The Farming of Bones*, *The New Yorker* commented on Danticat's "steely, nuanced style," and added, "[i]t's a testament to Danticat's skill that Amabelle's musical

⁵⁸ Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (New York: Soho Press, 1994).

⁵⁹ Edwidge Danticat, *Krik? Krak!* (New York: Soho Press, 1995).

⁶⁰ Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* (New York: Penguin, 1999).

⁶¹ Bonnie Lyons. "Interview with Edwidge Danticat," *Contemporary Literature* 44(2) (Summer 2003).

⁶² Lyons, 183.

sorrowing voice never falters.”⁶³ Marshall’s description of Danticat’s style resonates

with Madison Smart Bell’s interpretation of Danticat’s writing style. Bell asserts:

Danticat’s prose style is radically simple and wonderfully expressive—so graceful, poised, and apparently effortless that, lulled by the pleasure of reading, one may forget what terrible stories she has to tell—what terrible stories she is, in fact, telling... And there are endless examples of human beings’ capacity to violate and mortify each other: the state terror of the Duvalierist regime, or the massacre of Haitians on the Dominican border by Trujillo’s government, or the atrocities of the defacto regime of the 1990s, or... And all of it is presented with a lucid simplicity that lends the most awful scenes a mysterious beauty, a preternatural surreal air of calm.⁶⁴

Danticat continues to develop her craft. In the summer of 2002, Danticat married and moved from New York to Miami. This transition, which brings her closer to her Haitian homeland, no doubt wields considerable influence over her current fiction. Danticat views each text she writes as a chance to sharpen her craft and deepen her insight into the writing process. She describes the beginning of each new piece as “terrifying.” She says, “I don’t want to repeat myself, I want to get better with every word, every page.”⁶⁵

In certain respects, Danticat represents generations of Haitians experiencing the separation brought about by forced immigration. Under Duvalier, many childhoods were marked by separation from parents, violence, loss, and trauma. Describing her reaction to reading Danticat’s humble declaration, “I am an immigrant,” in the journal *Meridians: Feminism, Race, and Transnationalism* (2001), acclaimed Martinican writer, Maryse Condé remarks, “Edwidge Danticat, exiled in the United States, having

⁶³ This information based on an interview Bonnie Lyons conducted with Danticat for *Contemporary Literature* 44(2) (2003).

⁶⁴ Martin Munro, ed., *Edwidge Danticat: A Reader’s Guide* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010) 165.

⁶⁵ Munro, *Edwidge Danticat*, 23.

suffered a fate the same as that of thousands of Haitians, did not claim any exceptional status for herself. On the contrary, she offered her vulnerability and naked hands to all.”⁶⁶ Danticat’s vehicle for offering herself with such candor to her audience is clearly connected to her desire to reminisce, teach, and share with global communities the history of a tiny, but legendary nation. When reflecting on her work, readers remark how Danticat’s exploration of Haitian experiences and historical memory through fiction began with a story based on some of her own personal experiences as an immigrant (*Breath, Eyes, Memory*), but quickly progressed toward a more communal and mythic voice (*The Dew Breaker, Anacoanna*).⁶⁷

Danticat’s novels have revealed the author’s aspiration to cast a net wide enough to capture a broad range of voices and subjectivities. Her writings have progressively moved toward questioning, addressing, and articulating dimensions of Haitian history that had previously been unexplored, marginalized, or wholly overlooked (*The Farming of Bones, The Dew Breaker*). Danticat is particularly well versed in revealing the psychological implications of Duvalierist legacies and political violence on the collective psyche of Haitians and as well as Haitian Americans. Her exploration of the influences of traumatic chapters of Haitian history on the collective psyche of its citizens is often premised on the tension between dissimulation and confession, violence and forgiveness, and loss and healing.

Some readers of *The Dew Breaker* have felt the uncomfortable pull of indecision in their effort to categorize this text as a novel or as a group of synchronized short

⁶⁶ Munro, *Edwidge Danticat*, 178-179.

⁶⁷ Edwidge Danticat, *Royal Diaries: Anacoana Golden Flower, Haiti, 1490* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2005).

stories. My first readings of *The Dew Breaker* left me with the impression that this text can be regarded as both novel and a collection of interrelated short stories. Most important is the fact that *The Dew Breaker* can be read as the story of a daughter's reflection on paternal confession supports this perspective that the text is both novel and synchronized stories. The stories sandwiched between the initial and concluding moments of the novel shed light on the traumatic stories Ka's father has tried to keep hidden, while simultaneously serving as a social commentary on the torment and isolation that perpetrators of violence often suffer as a price for keeping dark and shameful secrets. As its stories of familial loss and connection illustrate, *The Dew Breaker* is narrated in a circuitous manner. We begin at the end and end at the beginning. The repetition of spiritual and personal rituals connects the beginning to the end and the past to the present. The path to healing is also circuitous in this text. Yet the benefits of rituals remain moot if the circle remains flat and never changes course to become a progressive upward spiral. This is what happens when family secrets and silence frustrate the benefits of rituals that might bring healing: in Danticat's fiction, secrets and silence sever the individual self from the communal self. Immigrants and those exiled from their native countries suffer from the isolation resulting from a disconnection of the self from community.

Soon after Papa Doc became president of Haiti in 1957, the political repression that dominated the country led to a mass exodus of intellectuals. Sustained political oppression, economic difficulties, and a lack of opportunities compelled an even larger segment of the population to flee the country. Haitians sought refuge in various countries, most notably in the United States, Canada, France, Cuba, and the Dominican

Republic.⁶⁸ In many respects, the Danticat family's migration to the United States is emblematic of a broader experience of migration. By October 1980, after over a decade of mass immigration, the United States government instituted a policy that classified Haitian migrants as unwelcomed economic refugees. However, this policy, along with the election of Jean Bertrand Aristide a decade later, did nothing to discourage immigrants from risking their lives on precarious life rafts bound for the shores of South Florida. By 1992, President Bush ordered that boats of Haitians found by the Coast Guard were to be returned to Haiti without screening. The Supreme Court upheld the order, ruling that deportation was legal, Haitians (and others) could be sent back to their country of origin. Still, Haitians persisted in their efforts to find safety and economic opportunities in North America. By focusing on the experience of Haitians in this diaspora in *The Dew Breaker*, Danticat seeks to tell the story of "successful" Haitian émigrés who have made it to the United States, but are traumatized and tormented by memories of the oppression they experienced (and sometimes themselves perpetrated) back in their homeland.⁶⁹

The Dew Breaker primarily focuses on family relationships as allegories of the oppressive relationships that exist between the Haitian government and its citizens. Names such as Papa Doc, Baby Doc, and Tontons (uncle) Macoutes suggest a familial relationship between the country's leaders and its people and inspire a certain degree of intimacy and affection among the citizens. Paradoxically, these same nicknames invoke

⁶⁸ Even before the Duvalier period, there was a long history of Haitian migration to the United States (as in the case of Chicago and New Orleans).

⁶⁹ See Lisl Doscher Phelps, "Overview, inhabited localities, and topography," in *Cultural Competency, Haitian Immigrants, and Rural Sussex County, Delaware*, accessed April 11, 2011, <http://www.salisbury.edu/nursing/haitiancultcomp/overview.htm>

the types of violence and discontent that may be found in some families. Even the designation “doc” can evoke a sense of the familiarity and trust that can exist between patients and their family physician. François Duvalier was a medical doctor before becoming involved in Haitian politics. Ironically, Duvalier exchanged his commitment to heal his fellow Haitians for a political agenda rooted in causing pain and terror. This irony is not far removed from the contradictions and paradoxes that readers encounter in *The Dew Breaker*.

While family can be a source of pain, trauma, and oppression, it can also bring about the strength needed to transcend these same problematic issues. In her analysis of both Danticat’s memoir *Brother, I’m Dying* and Danticat’s novel *The Dew Breaker*, Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw aptly observes, “if Haiti is Danticat’s subject, then it cannot be separated from the father figure, political, and personal.”⁷⁰ An interest in the analysis of fatherly loss and betrayal is evident in the way relationships are depicted in Danticat’s father-centered texts. As Walcott-Hackshaw notes,

both *The Dew Breaker* and *Brother I’m Dying* explore the notion of fatherhood through the lens of loss and betrayal. So the first line of *The Dew Breaker*: “My father is gone,” could be the last line of *Brother, I’m Dying*. Danticat’s “father” Joseph Dantica is betrayed by his own people and is forced to leave home; Ka, the Dew Breaker’s daughter is betrayed by her father; and both Ka and Joseph Dantica are betrayed by political fathers and patriarchal systems that have produced varying versions of “Papa” Docs, Dew Breakers, Tontons Macoutes, and Chimères, and places like Casernes or the Krome Detention Center.⁷¹

Walcott-Hackshaw analyzes family relationships from a political perspective to highlight the multilayered nature of loss. For Ka in *The Dew Breaker*, loss is also

⁷⁰ Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw, “Home Is Where the Heart Is: Danticat’s Landscapes of Return,” *Small Axe*, 21 (October 2008), 71-82.

⁷¹ These are all spaces or ideas associated with traumatic memories and loss resulting from political oppression. Walcott-Hackshaw, “Home is Where the Heart Is,” 82.

multivalent. The loss of her art precipitates the loss of her trust in her father as well as the loss of her artistic motivation. The loss of trust between father and daughter threatens to undermine their close relationship. *The Dew Breaker* begins by highlighting the depth of Ka's relationship with her father. While Ka sees her father as a nurturing and quiet man, she senses that there is a part of himself that he keeps carefully hidden. Readers understand that his secrecy is linked to a dark chapter of Haitian history that features the state-sponsored assassins, the Tonton Macoutes, known in Danticat's text as "the dew breakers."

"Dew breaker" originates from the Haitian-Creole term, "choukèt lawoze." In her review of Danticat's novel, Rhonda Cobham explains that the expression "refers to the silent, magical way in which dew 'falls' or 'breaks' as they say in Haitian Creole, on the early morning leaves." As Danticat explains, Haitians under Duvalier's regime used the term ironically to name the state-sponsored torturers who typically descended upon their victims in the silence before dawn.⁷² The aesthetically and linguistically elegant term "choukèt lawoze," then, describes (and in a way naturalizes) the ritualized kidnapping and murder of Haitians by the Macoutes. One of the characters in book explains the actions of these perpetrators of violence: "They'd break into your house. Mostly it was at night. But often they'd also come before dawn, as the dew was settling on the leaves, and they'd take you away." Duvalier's militiamen, the "Tonton Macoutes" were the haunting figures of a nightmarish reality. Contrary to the stereotypic images of doting uncles, they were the bogeymen from children's cautionary tales. In stories and in life, the Tonton Macoutes kidnapped naughty children at night,

⁷² Rhonda Cobham, "The Penance of Speech" *The Women's Review of Books*, 21(8) (May 2004).

placing them in the Macoute (knapsack) he carried on his back. In this sense, father figures in Haitian politics and folktales are imbued with totemic and archetypal value. They often carry negative images associated with a legacy of violence and fear. As corrupt father figures, they sever communal ties and leave psychological wounds on the people's psyche. These Haitian archetypal figures violate the traditional version of fathers as guide, protector, and a bridge between home and hearth.

This experience of corrupt father figures and leaders is described by one of characters in *The Dew Breaker* and is representative of a nightmare that had been lived repeatedly and collectively by Haitians. The perpetrators of this cruelty were brothers, fathers, and sons whose stories were often told from the perspectives of their victims and were rarely articulated by the men who committed these atrocious crimes against their fellow Haitians. *The Dew Breaker* presents the voices of victims (prey), but each of their stories is framed and is somehow connected to that of the dew breaker (hunter) and his daughter.

Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* is structured as a series of seemingly disconnected short stories. However, as readers become further invested in the text, there is a sense of coherence (indeed, this is why readers so frequently disagree on what to "call" this book: a novel? A collection of essays? A non-linear history?) The narrative comes together as a message grounded in the ideas of salvation, reconciliation, and reintegration into one's community. Like the immigrant's story it aims to tell, this book is, above all, about second chances. Danticat forms a collective voice out of the difficult experiences and memories of a number of Haitians and Haitian Americans living in New York. The voices of the community are sequenced in such a way that

each experience invariably links back to the relationship between a father (the said “dew breaker”) and his American-born daughter, Ka. These kindred spirits work symbiotically to promote forgiveness, healing, and understanding even while confronting secrecy and atrocity. Structurally, this multi-voiced narrative expresses the struggles of Haitian immigrants to assimilate into a new way of life that demands a careful selection of which rituals to reinvent and which to abandon.

Danticat strategically sandwiches episodes from the lives of Ka and her father at the beginning, middle, and end of the text. The book, in fact, begins at the end, and loops back to present narratives of the lives of a network of Haitian immigrants. Each character is either living a life that has been touched by the dew breaker’s past, or their experiences in some way echo Ka’s experiences as a daughter living a life shaped by events preceding her birth. The second and third chapters, “Seven” and “Water Child,” focus on family ties that are severed due to immigration, guilt, and secrets. These chapters are followed by another episode from the dew breaker’s family story, “The Book of Miracles.” After “The Book of Miracles,” the stories that follow take on a more urgent and violent tone. In these emotionally difficult chapters, Danticat demonstrates that nurturing family ties can support the individual in their effort to overcome traumatic events. These ties can foster resilience, healing, and transformation. Therefore, Danticat uses family archetypes and metaphors to reinforce the importance of family and community.

As a daughter of parents from a world of which she knows little, Ka learns to love her parents and take them at face value. Theirs is a very affectionate relationship, and Ka is especially close to her father. But soon her father’s confession of his past,

essentially *their* past as a family, defines her entry into a new level of self-awareness.

Ka suddenly realizes that beyond the rituals and intimacy she shares with her two closest kin, there is a more expansive community that connects back to her. These threads between her and the Haitian community have existed long before her birth, not unlike the “hundreds of slender threads” that Avey experiences standing among her people on the pier in Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* as “the center of a huge wide confraternity.”⁷³

In *The Dew Breaker*, Ka’s communal self exists because of this confraternity. Because Ka’s father seeks to protect his family from the consequences of the brutal killings, rape, and theft he committed against his fellow Haitians, he attempts to sever this ancestral connection and so isolates his family from the rest of the Haitian community. In this family story, the fear of being recognized as a former Macoute, a member of Duvalier’s ruthless militia, undermines and precludes confraternity.

As a Macoute, Ka’s father contributed to the nightmarishly violent atmosphere that prevailed during the Duvalier dynasty (1957-1986). Like the other militiamen, he had the power to rape and steal, to decide who would live and who would die. Men like the dew breaker psychologically scarred the collective body of the Haitian people. In his wake, he left paranoid victims: orphaned children, widowed women, and men tormented by feelings of powerlessness. This dark period in Haitian history in many ways echoes the psychic landscape of slavery. The difference between Ka’s father and a slave-driver is that his darker skin should ordinarily signal his belonging to the community of those who are exploited and mistreated. But like a slave-driver, the dew

⁷³ Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow*, 190-191.

breaker violates with impunity. His deeds as a Macoute alienate him from the rest of the Haitian community he has exploited and wounded. While he still lives in Haiti, his status as outsider is grounded in his role as oppressor. But when he meets Anne, starts a family, and immigrates to the United States, the dew breaker's alienation is reversed from isolated predator to alienated prey. The formation of his family brings a certain amount of healing for this former Macoute, even as he lives a life of silence, isolation, and fear. This dew breaker is forced to live without the support of a community. Such a reversal of fortune from powerful to powerless is in keeping with the universal law often repeated by Haitians as a proverb: "*yon jou pou chasè, yon jou pou jibye*" / "a day for the hunter, a day for the prey." So, although in New York he has an opportunity to forge a new community, his past sins complicate things. The former Macoute raises his daughter Ka without the grounding that Haitian-American community could provide, because he cannot reconcile his past with his new life in the United States.

The fear that other Haitian immigrants will learn of his presence and bring him to justice for his past crimes complicates the father's ability to fulfill his paternal role as the bridge between hearth and community. Traditionally, it has been the father's role to connect his children to the worlds beyond the intimate space of the home. Beyond the home lies the worlds of history, myth, politics, science, religion, and so forth. Just as mothers have been traditionally associated in psychoanalysis with the awareness of the existence of an individual self, the fathers's role is that of guiding their children to a second-self or the communal self. The communal self is the dimension of the individual psyche that is tied to a collective psyche that grows out of the rituals, legends, mores, worldviews, and folkways that define the sense of kinship experienced

among members of a given community. As seen in Westernized wedding ceremonies, a father's role as bridge for his daughter is nowhere more familiar and symbolic as when he gives her over in marriage to the groom. Fathers have traditionally supported the process of children weaning themselves from the intimate space of home. Thus begins the process of being introduced to communal cultures, structures, rituals, legends, and folk traditions. It is because of their fathers, that children are able to develop a sense of belonging to a wider network of individuals. This is the role that Ka's father tries to improvise while simultaneously remaining isolated from the Haitian-American community.

Haunted by his past, Ka's father cannot easily integrate himself and his family into the Haitian-American community in New York. So, in *The Dew Breaker* one finds that the personalization of rituals can act as the glue that binds the communal to the individual dimensions of the self. Since Ka's father chooses to share very little of Haiti's recent history with Ka and finds that he cannot directly transmit to her Haitian cosmology, he looks to an alternate past. The ex-Macoute, adopts and brings Ancient Egyptian mythology into the intimate space of their home.⁷⁴ He aptly remarks that the Ancient Egyptian world holds numerous cultural values in common with Haiti. He schools himself in Egyptian religious ways and thus becomes more capable of guiding his daughter in developing a communal self grounded in spiritual beliefs. He takes pride in Ka's accomplishments and in her choice to become a sculptor and a teacher.

⁷⁴ See Cheikh Anta Diop's *African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1989) and *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991).

He believes that these choices are outward confirmation of his spiritual imprint on his daughter.

Family relationships are the hallmarks of *The Dew Breaker* since they reach back to cultural rituals and reflect the critical concerns of Haitian communities living overseas. What to take, what to leave behind, which memories to keep and which to relegate to oblivion, what aspects of the self to suppress and which to emphasize all become part of the complex process of building a new identity in the host country. These are among the many decisions the dew breaker has to make. He takes deliberate steps toward masking his former self in order to protect himself and his family from the consequences of the crimes he committed back in Haiti. The opportunity to abandon and escape a former life full of dark secrets, violence, and sin represents nothing less than salvation for this father. He no longer wears the outward appearance of a man who was a torturer in François Duvalier's Haiti, but rather wears the mask of an ordinary barber living in New York.

It is in his relationship with his daughter that the dew breaker seeks the possibility of forgiveness. Although he renounces his former life after meeting his wife, they both admit that the birth of their only child, Ka, has played a critical role in his transformation into a quiet and even-tempered person. For this reason he names his daughter "Ka." He explains the meaning of her name when she complains that people taunt her by calling her "Kaka" or "Teacher Kaka". Using his best, accented English he tells her, "I call you Ka because in Egyptian world—A ka is a double of the body, the body's companion through life and after life. It guides the body through the kingdom of the dead. You see, ka is like soul. In Haiti is what we call good angel, *ti*

bon anj. When you born, I look at your face, I think, here is my ka, my good angel.”⁷⁵

In the Voodoo religion, cultural scholar Janheinz Jahn explains,

The highest ruler of all the loas (divinities, spirits) is *Bon Dieu*, the Good Lord. He is the creator of the world, but so high above man that he is not concerned with him... One says ‘If God wills’ (*Si dié vlé*) and resigns oneself therewith to one’s fate, but one does not pray to Bon Dieu... So much the more, however, does one honor the loas, those supernatural beings who are also in some districts called *saints* (saints) or *anges* (angels). Yet even when they are equated with the saints of the Catholic church, one knows that they come Africa (Guinea). For they are neither only good like angels or saints, nor only bad like devils. They are, *like the heart of man, neither good nor bad*.⁷⁶

A *ti bon anj* (translated loosely from Creole: “small good angel”) is somewhat similar to a “conscience” in the Western understanding of being. Therefore, Ka is not a mere symbol, but the incarnation of her father’s conscience. Ka, from the moment of her birth, is suffused with her father’s conscience and the energies of the ancestral worlds of Africa. With a name representing the fusion of the Ancient Egyptians and ancestral Africans brought to Haiti, Ka has a name and a past they can both accept with pride. Her name reaches across the Atlantic to join Africa and America.

Unlike her mother, Anne, who attends mass everyday, Ka and her father regularly forgo mass to visit the Brooklyn Museum. Egyptian lore is the screen through which Ka’s father chooses to reflect upon his past, who he has become, and his fate in the afterlife. His need to meditate on the transcendental aspects of life seems to motivate his love of museums. When he is not working at his barbershop, he is often

⁷⁵ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, 17. Please note that all other references to this book will occur within the text, with the page numbers noted in parentheses.

⁷⁶ The “loas” are powerful mediators between the humans and God, “Bondieu.” Unlike a Catholic Saint, a loa embodies both negative and positive forces. The loas may reprimand or dispense punishment on the individual for behavior the community deems unacceptable. In addition to the loas, Voodoo also recognizes the spirits of ancestors. A person has a universal soul, “gwo-bon-anj,” and a personal soul, which is the source of a person’s personality, “ti-bon-anj.” It is believed that a person is immortal through the gwo-bon-anj and can, over time, transcend this state to merge with a loa. See Michael J. Dash, *Culture and Customs of Haiti* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001) for more information.

drawn to the museum. There are several reasons the Ancient Egyptian rooms appeal to him. First, he sees many similarities between Ancient Egyptians and Haitians: “The Ancient Egyptians worshiped their gods in many forms, fought among themselves and were often ruled by foreigners. The pharaohs were like dictators he had fled and their queens were as beautiful as Gabrielle Fonteneau,” the gorgeous Haitian-born actress of an American television show (Danticat 13). However, what the dew breaker seems to admire most about the Ancient Egyptians is that they “know how to grieve.” He is amazed at the weeks-long mummification process and how this very act results in corpses that survive for thousands of years. Here is a clear illustration of a person working to make sense of his involvement with the making of a violent chapter of Haitian history, with how the consequences of his past sins will influence his legacy and his afterlife (Danticat 13). Ka’s father wants to leave a legacy that will survive in much the same way the wisdom and relics of this ancient African civilization have survived centuries. For him, Ka is the emblem of the positive mark he hopes to leave behind when he passes on to the next life. And, through his ritualistic appreciation of Ancient Egyptian culture, the father unknowingly influences his daughter’s desire to become a sculptor.

Art, as depicted in the story of this father and his daughter, proves to be the language of spiritual kinship. Little specialized knowledge is necessary to grasp the messages that Ka’s father deciphers and the reverence he feels when he contemplates the museum’s collection of statues and relics of the Ancient World. The former Macoute uses art to unite the remote past to his current life. In messages gleaned from the art pieces and mythic stories he reads, the father finds archetypes that help him

make sense of a nightmarish past that pursues and torments him even in his sleep.

Through Ancient Egyptian lore, the Haitian story of dictators and dictatorships makes sense. The dew breaker breaks down the temporal boundaries between the past, present, and future thus connecting Old World and New World. What he sees displayed in the museum motivates Ka's father to seek other resources to complement what he is learning with regard to Ancient Egyptian lore. He purchases his own copy of *The Book of the Dead*, which allows him to possess a piece of the Ancient world.

The universal theme of the tension between life and death dominates the narration of this relationship between Ka and her father. The moments of contemplation he spends with his daughter at the museum and the botanical gardens, have taught the dew breaker how to navigate this tension. His obsessive reading of *The Book of the Dead* reveals the repentance he feels for the unspeakable crimes he committed against his own people. As "hunter," this former Macoute functioned as an angel of death, killing people, their loved ones, and sowing seeds of grief in the lives of many. Later, when he works to define and create a new spiritual world for himself and his family, he considers whether he can make peace with his grim past.

The awe with which Ka's father regards the statues and relics in the museum invokes ideas of worship and reverence. He appears to have discovered in the Ancient Egyptian rooms his own space of worship. Since he is afraid of being recognized by a fellow Haitian person during Sunday mass, the dew breaker only attends Christmas mass with his family. His new life in New York is characterized by vigilance and anonymity. Instead of attending church, he creates his own museum ritual that fulfills his need for worship and communion with the gods.

The dew breaker also seeks forgiveness for his crimes and the assurance that his past sins will not cost him a successful passage into the next world. In order for this to happen he must reenact “the negative confessions,” an ancient Egyptian rite. He explains that this “ceremony that takes place before the weighing of hearts, giving the dead a chance to affirm that they’d done only good things in their lifetime” (Danticat 22). Even now as an adult, Ka remembers her father pronouncing these words: “I am not a violent man, I have made no one weep. I have never been angry without cause. I have never uttered any lies. I have never slain any men or women. I have done no evil” (Danticat 23). He reads and utters these words to his daughter the way one would articulate a confession to a spiritual leader in order to be pardoned and cleansed from transgressions. Therefore, the most symbolic and powerful of all the rituals that he reenacts with his daughter is his readings of “The Negative Confession.” Ka thus becomes his confessor, giving him hope that he may someday be forgiven. His repeated reading of this chapter of *The Book of the Dead* is the ritual that binds the dew breaker both to Ka and the world of the Ancient Egyptians.

The deep affection Ka has for her father is undeniable. But the expression of this affection would be difficult had they not shared these rituals, laden with spiritual value, since her childhood. Ka confesses her inability to grasp the spiritual significance of these family rituals when she articulates how she often felt terribly uninterested in the various outings that she and her father would go on; yet, she knew that she was “supposed to learn something” (Danticat 15). It would take her years to realize that their trips to the botanical garden, the zoo, and the museum was her father’s way of doing “his best to be like other fathers, to share as much of himself with [her] as he

could” (Danticat 15). So, Ka’s indoctrination into her father’s worldview is facilitated by their numerous outings and the habitual storytelling at bedtime. For a long time these rituals also held firmly in place the mask that the dew breaker positioned between his former and present identities. Yet, these were the moments in which Ka’s father, in his own way, served as a bridge to the broader Haitian community, granting her access to a collective consciousness and a new, but subtle, level of self-awareness.

As an adult, Ka feels inspired and driven to create the types of sculptures that could fascinate her father beyond the point of awe he would experience when contemplating Ancient Egyptian art. Indeed, her father is the impetus for her art. Ka shares with readers the fact that she has spent most of her adult life struggling to find the proper way to sculpt her father. Ka describes her father as “a quiet and distant man who only came alive while standing with me most of the Saturday mornings of my childhood, mesmerized by the golden masks, the shawabtis, and the schist tablets, Isis, Nefertiti, and Osiris, the Jackal-headed ruler of the underworld” (Danticat 13). As a sculptor, Ka works to create a concrete, physical articulation of the admiration she feels for her father. She uses her art to make a testament of his love of art, and his reverence of history and Ancient African cultures.

Ka remembers that even as a child she was a keen observer of art. While her father would linger around various sculptures, admiring them for hours, she would precociously notice how there were pieces missing from them, such as their eyes, nose, legs, and sometimes even their heads. Unlike her father, who focused on what was there, Ka was concerned with what was *missing*: “Of course, this way of looking at things was why I ultimately began sculpting in the first place, to make statues that

would amaze my father even more than these ancient relics” (Danticat 19). Part of her objective as an artist is to work with the fragments, pieces of the whole that are loudly absent and therefore, silent. Ka’s artistic motives run parallel to her symbolic and perhaps unconscious quest for the silent fragments of her family legacy. As Mircea Eliade asserts, artists can circumvent fate.⁷⁷ Diane Apostolos-Cappadona expands on this argument, explaining that artists

Suspend the traditional perception of time and space by the act of “making,” an act in which we share through participating in the environment of that artwork. During the moments of artistic creation, artists fulfill the fundamental human instinct for transcendence... Momentarily tasting transcendence, artists break the iron band of individuality and experience universality.⁷⁸

The very appeal of Ka’s father-sculpture lies in its emblematic nature and its ability to resonate with those who see her art. Ignorant of her family’s history, Ka fails to experience the universality Apostolos-Cappadona describes. She does not realize that her subject matter has universal appeal, particularly to daughters of African descent. She forfeits this “taste of transcendence” and also diminishes her desire to be taken seriously as an artist. Instead, she fervently seeks validation. She betrays her uncertainty as a self-identified artist when she confesses to readers: “I’m really not an artist, not in the way I’d like to be. I’m more of an obsessive wood-carver with a single subject thus far—my father” (Danticat 4). When a friend makes it possible for her to sell her father piece to a high-profile client like the actress Fonteneau, Ka starts dreaming of building a reputation and a good clientele. Fonteneau’s interest in her craft seems to legitimize her aspirations as a serious artist. Her father however, seems to

⁷⁷ Mircea Eliade, “Foreword—Literature and Fantasy,” *Tales of the Sacred and the Supernatural* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 7-13.

⁷⁸ Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, introduction to *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts* by Mircea Eliade (New York: Crossroad, 1985), xii.

jeopardize this fragile dream when he deliberately loses the statue. Perhaps finding and bringing together the fragments of her family's legacy will enable Ka to conquer her insecurity and claim for herself an identity as a serious artist.

It is no coincidence that Ka chooses wood as the medium for her art. Traditionally, wood has been a privileged material for Haitian sculptors. It is used to make masks, statues, musical instruments, culinary tools, and jewelry. The use of wood to create these objects used in various areas of Haitian life is a means of keeping alive the connections between African and New World traditions. As Janheinz Jahn explains in *Muntu*, of all the materials used among Africans to make a sculpture, only the piece of wood that the woodcarver uses to make a sculpture is considered "something more than other 'things': It comes from the tree, from the 'road of the invisible ones', as they say in Haiti, from the vertical that unites the water-*Nommo*⁷⁹ of the depths with the cosmos."⁸⁰ He then describes the African belief that wood functions as a "repository," as a seat of the *loas*. The wood of such trees is a privileged *kintu*. Jahn asserts that this reverence is not reserved for the wood itself, but for the *loas*, the *orisas*, the ancestors, who have designated it as their chosen medium.⁸¹ Ka follows in the tradition of "the designation of the image." Jahn describes this process: "The designation of the image determines what the image expresses. The woodcarver carves a figure, and says meanwhile, 'let this piece of wood mean Erinle' (an *orisa*), and so the figure expresses

⁷⁹ In the Dogon culture of central Mali, "Nommo" is the driving power... that gives life and efficacy to all things... the magical force that activates and enlivens all other forces. Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: African Culture and The Western World* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1990), xxi).

⁸⁰ Jahn, *Muntu*, xxi.

⁸¹ Jahn, *Muntu*, 156.

the orisa Erinle, it becomes an ideogram of the orisa.”⁸² Although designation of the image is not determined by appearance of the figure, but by the force that the woodcarver attributes to it through the spoken word, Ka has a particular ancestor (her father) in mind when she creates her art. Jahn finds that in the act of designation, African sculpture dispenses with all individual expression and all psychology.⁸³ Thus, African wood-based art may take on a psychic, spiritual, and communal dimension. This may explain why Fonteneau feels such a strong affinity to Ka’s sculpture after having first seen it in a photograph. The Nommo Ka has attributed to her father-piece allows it to transcend the individual. The Nommo raises Ka’s art to the level of the communal, where it can be translated and recognized by other people because of the idiom of the collective unconscious, recognizable and readily grasped by many in the African diaspora. As an artist, Ka uses mahogany, her imagination and hands to articulate the details and emotions that viewers may sense. Although they may find it difficult to pinpoint precisely the sentiments summoned by their experience of her art. Her most valuable sculpture, her “father piece,” reminds the Haitian American actress of her own father.

When Ka later discovers that her father has taken the sculpture, she is furious, but struggles to express her emotions. Ironically, this inability to express her anger is a trait she attributes to her observation of father, a man who rarely shows his irritation or rage. After a dreaded visit to the Fonteneau’s Tampa home to inform the actress that the statue has been lost, Ka finds herself struggling to understand and reconcile her feelings for the person her father used to be in Haiti and the man she has known since

⁸² Jahn, *Muntu*, 157.

⁸³ Jahn, *Muntu*, 157.

her childhood. Her perspective of her father takes on a more threatening and disturbing tone. It becomes difficult to decide if she can continue to honor him with her art. Ka finds herself scrutinizing him while simultaneously wondering how she would sculpt him at distinct moments. As she watches him sitting on the edge of the bed the morning after he reveals his horrific past, she decides that if she were to sculpt him at that particular moment she would “carve a praying mantis, crouching motionless, seeming to pray, while actually waiting to strike” (Danticat 26). Ka’s reconciliation of the past and present bring to mind chapters from *The Book of the Dead* which now suggests to her a different interpretation of the familiar man who has now been transformed into a virtual stranger because of the information he has revealed to her (Danticat 31).

Ka’s father values the sculpture to such an extent that he even considers being buried with it. Unfortunately, Ka is blind to the spiritual meaning he attaches to her father-sculpture. When she describes him as looking like an “Ancient Egyptian funerary priest, kneeling with his hands prayerfully folded on his lap,” Ka finds it difficult to rid herself of her long held belief of her father as a person who is kind, meek, and worthy of respect (Danticat 18). She sees her father much like the priests who are devoted to expressing reverence for God and all living things. Indeed, in Danticat’s elegant prose, this moment of the novel evokes the feelings of solemnity one might associate with worship, sacred spaces, and spiritual rituals.

In an indirect manner, religious rituals and cultural ceremonies pervade every chapter of *The Dew Breaker*. From the first chapter, Ka speaks of the sensation she sometimes experiences when she is carving. As she talks to her mother on the phone about her father’s confession of his former life, Ka feels overpowered by this familiar

feeling. She describes this experience as something akin to being in a trance or being possessed by a powerful ancestral spirit: “this sensation that my hands don’t belong to me at all, that something else besides my brain and muscles is moving my fingers, something bigger and stronger than myself, an invisible puppetmaster over whom I have no control. I feel as though it’s this same puppetmaster that now forces me to lower the phone and hang up in mid-conversation on my mother” (Danticat 25).

Although this experience is described in a manner similar to inspiration, there are other experiences that illustrate how the “puppetmaster” sensation is linked to an invisible and more powerful influence. This impression is linked to Haitian cosmological beliefs in the influences that invisible and spiritual energies can exert on the most mundane experiences of a person’s life.

The mark that her father’s last prisoner left on his face is a significant mark of kinship and communal history, because in this instance it connects the perpetrator of crimes to his victims. In this story of a father and his daughter, the dew breaker’s confessional moment best illustrates the paternal role as a bridge to greater communal consciousness. After revealing his secret past to Ka, the dew breaker rubs the scar on the side of his face. Out of a “strange reflex,” Ka mirrors the action. She finds this interesting and concludes:

Maybe the last person my father harmed had dreamed moments like this into my father’s future, strangers seeing that scar furrowed on his face and taking turns staring at it and avoiding, forcing him to conceal it with his hand, pretend it’s not there, or make up some lie about it, to explain (Danticat 32).

It is interesting that Ka should mention her father’s last victim possibly *dreaming* this moment into their present, because her mother’s *brother* (Ka’s uncle) was her father’s

last victim. It is because of this last victim that he meets Ka's mother and decides to abandon the life of a Macoute. This situation once again accentuates Marshall's remark that even those we regard as strangers are indeed part of our broader circle of kinship. If Ka is marked by ancestral energies, then it follows that her art, product of her mind and touch, will also exude these captivating energies. These energies unwittingly attract and connect Ka's experiences to other members of the Haitian community in the United States. Such a connection may in part explain Fonteneau's initial attraction to Ka's sculpture when she sees it in a photograph.

The story of Ka and her father is first presented to readers in "The Book of the Dead," the first chapter of *The Dew Breaker*. But this paternal narrative is revisited several times and becomes newly textured throughout the text. The chapters "Seven" and "Water Child" address numerous personal, familial, and spiritual rituals that Haitian Americans utilize in order to deal with the consequences of their forced migration. Just as the rituals Ka and her father shared had spiritual connotations, the second and third chapters (or stand-alone stories), "Seven" and "Water Child," use language pertaining to the realm of the spiritual ceremonies. These rites illustrate the link between migration and the conscious act of creating personal rituals. In these two short stories, even the most commonplace acts are imbued with spiritual significance.

Leaving one's homeland can mean the possibilities for a brighter future and the opportunity to realize one's dream, but it can also bring a sense of isolation, loss, and disillusionment. One can never replicate with precision the experiences, relationships, and settings left behind. Thus, it becomes a matter of survival to continue familiar rituals or create new ones in order to transcend a debilitating sense of disorientation,

isolation, or nostalgia. After living in the United States for seven years without his wife, the nameless protagonist in “Seven” announces to his two Haitian roommates, Michel and Dany that his wife will soon join him in the United States. The main character begins preparing their bachelor apartment and adjusts his bachelor lifestyle for his wife’s arrival: “Gone were the early-evening domino games” and arriving home in the early hours of the morning from the club Rendez Vous (Danticat 38). These are few of the many “sacrifices [he makes] for his wife.”

This man has meticulously framed and arranged an assortment of photographs that his wife has religiously sent to him from Haiti. He has dedicated the wall directly facing his bed for this collection of photographs. Over time, this wall has become fraught with symbolic and spiritual implications. After a long day of working his two jobs as a janitor, he comes back to the intimate space of his room, where memories of their courtship and early life together remain vivid. The wall facing his bed is his personal museum display, his altar, and his memorial wall whose purpose is not to remember the dead, but the living. In return for the sacrifices he has made, the man’s wife tries to bring him an abundance of gifts invoking the homeland. Her offering includes: mangoes, sugarcane, avocados, grapefruit-peel preserves, peanut, cashew, and coconut confections, and a small packet of trimmed chicken feathers, which she remembers her husband enjoys twirling in his ear. These are the products that most Haitians nostalgically associate with cherished memories of their homeland. Her offerings represent a shared past in Haiti and symbolize her hope that they can overcome the consequences of seven years of separation. When the customs officer

disposes of the gifts intended for her husband, it is as if he has symbolically banned her desire to remember and her hope for the future.

Similar to the secrets that haunt the dew breaker, many secrets have emerged in the lives of both husband and wife, distancing them from each other. However, it is folk rituals of Haiti that bring them together. The husband hopes they can rekindle the passion they initially shared, when they met attending carnival festivities. Jacmel's Carnival is a public and annual manifestation of a collective Afro-diasporic ritual in one of Haiti's most artistic towns. To the husband, this is a ritual that binds. He reminisces over how he fell in love during the finale of the festivities. His wife had volunteered to be an official weeper for the symbolic purging from the carousing of the preceding days and nights. As the carnival revelers burned their carnival masks and costumes, the official weepers feigned weeping by the beach. His future bride cried so convincingly and passionately that he concluded she could love with the same intensity. But in New York, readers realize that the husband doubts his wife's ability to love him again.

Toward the end of "Seven," the husband's desire to reach beyond the distance between them is palpable. As he holds her hand and walks along Flatbush Avenue, he yearns to repeat his favorite part of carnival: "A bride and groom, in their most lavish wedding clothing, would wander the streets. Scanning a crowd of revelers, they'd pick the most stoned-faced person and ask 'Would you marry us?'" His desire to repeat this part of carnival shows that it is slowly dawning on him just how deep a chasm seven years of separation can place between two people. The protagonist dreads the truth he must inevitably face: they can never truly return to the way things were. A very tangible sign of that impossibility is the silence that has settled over the couple by the

end of the story. Overwhelmed by a sense of desperation, the husband expresses the insane urge to approach any strangers they meet on Flatbush Avenue and ask: “Will you marry us?”

In the third story, “Water Child,” familial silence, loss, and separation figure prominently in the life of the thirty-year-old Haitian immigrant and nurse, Nadine. Despite maintaining a regular relationship with her parents through phone calls and letters, Nadine has taken deliberate steps to remain disconnected from her family and her immediate community. Her life is overshadowed by a great sense of loss. She suffers alone since she believes she cannot share her sorrow—the abortion of her first pregnancy—with her parents.

“Water Child” shows that personal rituals do not have to necessarily come from one’s own home culture. Nadine tries to find comfort in performing a Japanese ceremony that involves pouring water over altars of stone for unborn children. This ritual represents a desire to heal, forgive, and move beyond burdensome feelings. But healing remains a frustrated possibility for Nadine so long as she keeps an invisible wall around herself. Her parents, her former lover, and her colleagues at the hospital cannot break this wall. Unfortunately, Nadine’s altar does not encourage healing, but invites her to repeat her shame and relive her gut-wrenching pain that separates her from those who could offer her support through a traumatic moment in her life. Her shame is so powerful that it becomes toxic. Like the couple in “Seven,” Nadine is stuck. Like Ka’s father, she wonders what a predator keeping a dark secret can claim.

Both Nadine and Ka are only children, both cherished by their parents, but the nature of their relationships with their parents is drastically different. Nadine’s sense of

debt to her parents makes her afraid to disappoint them. After all, they sacrificed so she could attend nursing school in the United States. This fear aggravates the detachment the geographic distance between New York and Haiti already brings. She is thus trapped and silenced by a sense of debt and a sense of shame. She knows that her parents would not approve of her having a child out of wedlock, but these middle-class, Christian Haitians would surely also disapprove of her abortion. Unlike Ka who lives in close proximity to her parents, Nadine can use the geographical distance between her and her parents to further isolate herself and weaken her communication with them. To compensate for the void she feels, she resorts to a life of repetition: She buys the same meal from the hospital cafeteria. She reads the most recent letter her mother sends over and over and cares for the altar to her aborted baby. The only act that seems to bring her solace is her decision to paint a portrait of what her baby may have possibly looked like. Like Ka, Nadine uses art to process a piece of her history that is broken, painful, and full of silences (Danticat 57).

In many ways, Nadine's relationship with her parents seems more fragile than Ka's with her parents. Ka's sense of acceptance and belonging may have much to do with the early father-daughter rituals that fortified their kinship. Family rituals work to strengthen generational bonds. They are particularly important in solidifying family relationships across gender lines (between mother and son, father and daughter). Ka realizes that her father values her to such an extent that he makes it a priority to spend time with her and share with her the activities that he finds most interesting. Yet, Ka's father is also her closest friend. On the other hand, Nadine considers neither her father nor her mother as confidant. Nadine's reluctance to disappoint her parents may be a

reflection of the degree to which she reveres them. She is so ashamed of what she regards as her sin that she constructs a wall between herself and her parents. This wall further exacerbates the physical distance between New York and Haiti. The silence that enshrouds sexual life and relationships is for Haitians a danger that often threatens intergenerational communion and conviviality. With Ka, it is the father who hides secrets; in Nadine's situation, she is the one hiding an event she feels ashamed to share with her parents.

In "Water Child," the inability to scream from the nightmarish state left behind by trauma is ever present. In choosing to remain silent, Nadine allows guilt to stifle her life. She leaves little room to grieve and forgive herself.

Nadine finds herself identifying with one of her patients, Ms. Hinds. Ms. Hinds, a healthy young kindergarten teacher wakes up at the hospital to find that she has lost her ability to speak. Grasping this traumatic reality overwhelms her; Ms. Hinds's disorientation, isolation, and shock result in a violent outburst that only Nadine seems to be able to handle. Like the young laryngectomy patient, Nadine has faced a tremendous loss early in life and pushes herself into a state of noiselessness. Like the dew breaker, Nadine's guilt and secrecy severs her relationship from those who could possibly provide solace that she desperately needs.

The story ends with a sense of hopelessness. Grieving has led Nadine to a place where she can no longer recognize herself when she sees her own reflection staring back at her. In their search for healing, some people choose to return home or make a pilgrimage to a space that is regarded as sacred. A return to the homeland has been complicated for both Nadine and Ka. While Ka's family is shackled by her father's

crimes, it is Nadine's sense of guilt that denies her a return or the possibility of healing that such a return could bring.

While several chapters in *The Dew Breaker* highlight spiritual rituals, the fourth chapter, "The Book of Miracles," centers on Christian rituals and brings the reader back into the lives of Ka and her parents. The reader accompanies Ka's family on one of their annual pilgrimages. Their interaction as they drive to Christmas Eve mass reveals their various degrees of faith and the family's tolerance for a variety of spiritual perspectives.

Some Haitians traditionally make an annual trip to their ancestral land to renew bonds of kinship and honor their ancestors. This trip itself functions as a sort of pilgrimage that allows people to experience a spiritual revival and a sense of reconnection with the greater community. The trip to Christmas Eve mass functions very much like such a pilgrimage for Ka's family. As they drive to mass, Anne, the most devout Catholic of the three, laments that she must endure the drive with an avowed-Atheist daughter and a husband "who went to the Brooklyn Museum every week to worship, it seemed to her, at the foot of Ancient Egyptian statues." She feels "outnumbered by pagans," and dreads passing by a cemetery that forces her to annually relive and silently grieve the loss of her three-year-old brother on a beach many years earlier. But she is willing to brave these discomforts so that on the holiest of nights her family may renew their sense of connectedness. Their kinship is reinforced through such rituals.

Both parents attempt to raise Ka to be thankful for all that she already possesses. For this reason, they do not offer Christmas gifts. This lesson is so effectively learned

that the only Christmas ritual Ka cherishes is driving around to criticize the gaudiest houses on the block. During this drive Anne enjoys sharing the most recent miracles she learned about from various religious cable programs. Readers get a glimpse into how Ka sometimes feels like an outsider with her parents. While she expresses disbelief at the miraculous tales her mother relates, her father encourages the mother to share, asking questions to help animate the tales. In this moment Ka's father acts as a mediator between mother and daughter. Anne is fascinated and eager to tell stories of miracles from around the world, because they are a means of indirectly telling of her husband's miraculous transformation. Since at this point in their lives Anne cannot outright share with their daughter her husband's story, Anne consoles herself by narrating the many miracles experienced by Lebanese, Filipino, and other non-Americans living on the other side of the world. This only serves to highlight the distinction between Anne and Ka's way of perceiving the world. Ka asks her mother why it is that all of her stories involve witnesses from foreign countries. Her mother replies: "because Americans don't have much faith." Ka responds by observing that: "people here are more practical maybe, but in Haiti or the Philippines, that's where people see everything, even things they're not supposed to see. So if I see a woman's face in a rose, I'd think somebody drew it there, but if you see it, Manman, you think it's a miracle" (Danticat 73). Could this line of reasoning foreshadow the fact that Ka may not see her father's transformation as miraculous when he confesses his past crimes?

Anne, believer of miracles, honors the Christmas season through a secret ritual that speaks of her hopes that their family secret, when revealed, will not tear their family apart:

When her daughter was still living at home, the only way Anne honored the season with her daughter—aside from attending the Christmas Eve Mass—was to put a handful of shredded brown paper under her daughter’s bed without her knowledge. The frayed paper was a substitute for the hay that had been part of the baby Jesus’ first bed. Over her bedroom doorway, she also hung a spring of mistletoe. She’d once heard a mistletoe vendor say that mistletoe had all sorts of reconciliatory qualities, so that if two enemies ever found themselves beneath it, they would have to lay down their weapons and embrace each other (Danticat 74).

Anne’s faith in miracles is prominent. She acts as healer, and in many ways, a reconciliator, working to encourage a positive relationship between Ka and the former dew breaker. Maintaining a strong sense of kinship is important to Anne as Ka matures and starts to branch away from the intimate space of her home to attend college. Since she lives outside the home, family for Ka becomes a metaphor for a wider network of social relationships.

While the dew breaker and his wife struggle to regain a more holistic life through the acts of forgiveness and reconciliation, his victims struggle to lead dignified lives as survivors in the United States. The chapters that follow “The Book of Miracles” focus on the young people whose lives have been touched by the violence of the Duvalier dictatorship. For these characters the lasting consequences are fatherlessness or psychological trauma. In the first of such chapters, “Night Talkers,” we rejoin Dany, one of the roommates from “Seven.” The chapter muses over the tension between forgiveness and vengeance. Dany’s inner conflict reveals how a sense of communal suffering brings about an ethical response among victims of violence.

Morality, though, becomes especially pronounced when there seems to be no clear motive behind the act of violence perpetrated.

Dany feels a strong urge to return to Haiti. There is important news he needs to share with his beloved aunt Estina: he believes he has found the Macoute who murdered his parents and left his aunt blind. On that fateful night, Dany caught a glimpse of the large man with the widow's peak (Ka's father) whom he believes set their house on fire, shot his parents, and threatened to shoot him. Now he returns to his small home village in Haiti, hoping that aunt Estina will provide some clue as to the possible motives behind his parents's murder, but she dies in her sleep before Dany is able to tell her of his discovery.

Now we learn that Dany has been renting a room in the basement of the Macoute with the widow's peak. He has formed a plan to avenge his parents by killing the unsuspecting dew breaker, but when Dany finally gets the opportunity to murder Ka's father in his sleep, he discovers with horror that the will to kill has abandoned him:

Looking down at the barber's face, which had shrunk so much over the years, he lost the desire to kill. It wasn't that he was afraid, for he was momentarily feeling bold, fearless. It wasn't pity, either. He was too angry to feel pity. It was something else, something less measurable. It was the dread of being wrong, of haring the wrong man, of making the wrong woman a widow and the wrong child an orphan. It was the realization that he would never know why—why one single person had been given the power to destroy his entire life (Danticat 107).

Dany's self-control and mercy when he has the upper hand communicates something powerful about the collective experience of violence: It can be difficult to differentiate between victims and perpetrators. Dany finds the idea of inadvertently destroying the wrong family repulsive. He understands that when a nation is dominated by violence and terror, anyone can be mistaken for someone else and the innocent often get caught

in the crossfire. Should he continue this cycle of violence? Does the belief “if you kill people, you can take their knowledge, become everything they were” hold true (Danticat 109)? Could the dew breaker have accidentally transformed into a more humane individual and a gentle father due to the many noble and innocent men, women, and children he killed?

This chapter also leads the reader to ponder the relationship between victims and perpetrators of violence. Toward the end of the story, Dany has many unanswered questions. He consoles himself with the idea that “perhaps the barber was not his parents’s murderer after all, but just a phantom who’d shown up to escort him back here to see his last living relative before she passes away” (Danticat 116). Yet Dany’s return to the Haitian countryside is connected to loss. In the essay “Imaginary Homelands,” Salman Rushdie proposes that loss due to emigration is an experience with which everyone can identify. He writes, “the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity.”⁸⁴ Rushdie believes that writers, exiles, emigrants, and expatriates share an urge to look back in order to reclaim what has been lost, and the act is actually productive in that it leads to the creation of “imaginary homelands.” In her analysis of Danticat’s “Night Talkers,” Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw expands on Rushdie’s argument about the connection amongst return, loss, and acts of the imagination:

On the page every return is ultimately an act of imagination. Writers often locate their character’s return within the “real” island landscape where there are identifiable cultural markers to emphasize the authenticity of the location. Danticat has several landscapes of return: the landscape of the real and the landscape of dreams, myth, and memory. But the landscape of “Night Talkers”

⁸⁴ Salman Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands” in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 9-21.

tells us that if Haiti is home, it is ultimately an ambiguous place that contains both nightmares and childhood memories of many lost “fathers.”⁸⁵

In “Night Talkers,” Dany’s experiences upon returning to Haiti illustrate how imagination and dreaming are connected to a physical place. These elements of the psyche point to the ways people use pilgrimages as means of recovering from loss and reaching closure.

Dany’s return to Haiti evokes the relationship between returning to the homeland and the ability to achieve healing from traumas of the past. He meets Claude, a young man deported from the U.S. for killing his father. Dany’s own dilemma evaporates as he evaluates Claude’s story. He realizes that he is not alone, since his personal pain becomes part of a shared pain. Like the barber, Dany is haunted by the past. They both reveal these secrets as they talk in their sleep. They are night talkers, “*palannits*, people who wet their beds, not with urine but with their words” (Danticat 89). Unlike the barber, however, Dany decides to counter secrets and violence by forgiving. Dany acknowledges that all Haitians suffered through the dictatorship together. He would not want to be responsible for continuing a violent, unforgiveable cycle by breaking the former Macoute’s family. Rituals of healing become essential to break the cycle of violence, a mark of Haiti’s colonial legacy. That is the story and the lesson of Haiti: Everyone experienced suffering together. This legacy of unity in spite of adversity is one that most Haitian immigrants cherish and hope to transmit to young Haitian Americans by liberating their personal and traumatic histories. It can be argued that the ritualized and intergenerational sharing of these stories mimics the act of physically returning to Haiti.

⁸⁵ Walcott-Hackshaw, “Home Is Where the Heart Is,” 71-82.

In the next chapter of *The Dew Breaker*, “The Bridal Seamstress,” the reader becomes acquainted with the situation of young Haitian Americans and symbolic return to Haiti through stories transmitted by an older Haitian who survived a cruel experience during the Duvalier era. This chapter is about the positive seeds that could be sown through the act of bearing witness.

In this story Beatrice shares her disturbing memories with Aline, a young journalist interning at the *Haitian American Weekly*. Beatrice lives a decent life in New York as a well-known and respected bridal seamstress. However, she is forced to retire earlier than she would like due to a sense of paranoia that plagues her life and her decisions. Beatrice shares the reason for her retirement with Aline as they stroll down the block. Unlike Ka, Aline gets to hear this story of pain and violence that her parents’s generation suffered through. Beatrice shows the physical scars left behind by a dictatorship that victimized her when she was a young woman. She believes that the man who arrested her, tied her, whipped the bottoms of her feet until they bled, and forced her to walk barefoot on tar roads after she refused the advances of a Macoute back in Haiti, is now pursuing her. Beatrice’s way of dealing with this trauma is to periodically move from house to house all over New York. However, this ritual of moving around does not bring the peace of mind she desperately seeks from her troubled past. Just as Dany is not sure that the barber is the true perpetrator of the crime against his family, Aline seems to believe that Beatrice’s fears are unfounded—she may just be imagining the face of her tormentor in the faces of random men.

Beatrice begins her personal testimony by sharing a story that clarifies for readers the phrase “dew breaker”: “We called them choukèt lawoze [dew breakers].

They'd break into your house. Mostly it was at night. But often they'd also come before dawn, as the dew was settling on the leaves, and they'd take you away. He was one of them, the guard" (Danticat 131). Aline, who thought she had come to write a simple article about a retiring bridal seamstress, is engrossed. While she believes that Beatrice is "a bit nutty," she also finds herself crossing the street to investigate and find evidence that would support Beatrice's story. By the end of the story, the reader comes to realize how Ka's story is echoed in that of Aline's. The two young women are professionally and coincidentally engaged in interpreting the stories of victims of the Duvalier era. Aline decides to dedicate her life's work as a reporter writing about people like Beatrice:

Growing up poor but sheltered in Somerville, Massachusetts, Aline had never imagined that people like Beatrice existed, men and women whose tremendous agonies filled every black space of their lives. Maybe there were hundreds, even thousands, of people like this, men and women chasing fragments of themselves long lost to others. Maybe Aline herself was one of them (Danticat 138).

This realization gives Aline the courage to consider making a return of her own. She wants to be unburdened by a long guarded secret by coming out to her parents as a lesbian. It is ironic that just as Beatrice is about to retire from a profession that has allowed the Macoute to continue to follow her wherever she moves, Aline is making her decision on starting a career that deals with what Beatrice would rather forget. In this book, Ka, Nadine, and Aline's relationships with their parents—their fathers in particular—are diminished by secrets.

"Monkey's Tails" documents the ritualistic act of myth-making in order to account for the absence of fathers. There is also an indirect message about the effects of fatherlessness on boys who themselves eventually become fathers. One of the

primary results of being fatherless is that mothers must create myths to account for the father's absence. In this chapter, Michel from "Seven" revisits his childhood, using a cassette tape to record an account for his unborn son. He believes that it is important that he tells his child about the day he truly became a man and shares a personal story that focuses on his first true friend, Romain. Michel idolized Romain, much as one would an older brother. Both boys are fatherless, but find solace in their friendship. Michel, like his roommate, Dany, was raised by a woman. However, it is the difference between these two men that binds their childhood experiences: they are fatherless due to different social tensions. Dany is fatherless because his parents are murdered by a Macoute. Michel is fatherless because his father, living across the street from him, refuses to legitimize their relationship. His mother carefully crafts a story about how his father died before Michel was born. It was, she says, "something political."

As an adult, Michel decides not to dwell on this idea, but endeavors to record a family history crafted by a father and centered on brotherly love. Romain's father, Regulus, was also absent due to "something political." "Monkey's Tale" describes the jubilant, yet violent climate of Port-au-Prince on the day Jean-Claude Duvalier was escorted out of the country. The streets were crowded with people ready to bring judgment on Macoutes like Regulus. In the story, Romain's father is hiding somewhere in the city and cannot be found. He is doing his best to avoid the pallbearers looking for men like him to parade in their mock funeral procession. Michel's rendition of this chapter of his life becomes more intense as he describes Romain's grief as he faces the possibility of never being able to reconnect with Regulus. Now that the tables have turned, the families of Macoutes are about to suffer like the families of victims of their

dictatorship. Indeed, Danticat underscores here how both victims and perpetrators suffered as a people.

“Funeral Singer” continues the theme of fatherlessness, except that in this chapter the focus is on its effect on a daughter whose father has been disappeared by Duvalier’s men. Freda is a twenty-two-year-old immigrant enrolled in a G.E.D. course with two other Haitian women, Rézia and Mariselle. Since Freda’s identity and destiny have been shaped by her father’s folk songs, she finds that she feels compelled to introduce herself to her classmates through her father’s favorite fisherman’s song.

As a child, we learn, Freda would sometimes accompany her father to work by the sea. Among the many folk songs he sang, the one he sang most often was “Brother Timonie.” Once Freda asked her father about the identity of this Brother Timonie he kept singing about. He mused that the song speaks about a person who may have lost his life while facing an insurmountable challenge put forth by nature.

After Freda’s father is arrested and beaten severely by the Macoutes, he is so humiliated and feels so hopeless that he takes off on his boat, never to be seen again. At his funeral, Freda sings his favorite song, “Brother Timonie,” which he often sang when he felt a storm approaching. Now, when she feels nervous or afraid, Freda finds comfort in singing it. The audience is so taken by her sorrowful performance, they start requesting and paying her to come sing at funerals. Freda describes her profession as a dying art. Her father’s songs become inextricably linked to who she is. Freda’s relationship to her father mirrors Ka’s relationship with her father. The difference is that Freda’s father was the victim of this political order while Ka’s father was one of the executors of the criminal designs of the regime.

Studying for the G.E.D. becomes the pretext that Freda and her friends use to meet after class at Rézia's restaurant. They form something like a support group for women victimized by the Duvalier era, exchanging tales about their past in Haiti, drinking wine and rum, and shamelessly laying their sorrows on the table. Over time, Freda remarks that their little ritual allows them to walk out feeling less burdened by their past. They become members of a tiny clan bound by sorrow, sealed by a desire to heal and move forward both in their minds and in the United States.

The narrative, told from Freda's perspective, reveals how singing as another form of telling one's story can be transformed into a ritual of healing and the self-discovery. When Freda sings her songs at a funeral, others are touched by the words and her sorrowful tone because they can identify with pain that she herself feels over the loss of her father. Each time she sings, Freda takes a step toward recovery, her paternal heritage, and thus brings members of the audience closer to their own healing.

Looking back over the whole text, it is clear that after the first chapter establishes the plot and setting, the stories that follow, "Seven" and "Water Child," illustrate how the simple act of filling one's life with rituals is just the beginning of self-discovery and personal transformation. Despite the personal rituals that the characters have included in their lives, the possibility for healing and personal insight remains frustrated. The reader is left with the impression that the characters are trapped in a nightmare of their own making. Both of these stories end inconclusively. The personal rituals created by the characters of "Seven" and in "Water Child" seem to question the healing powers of the spiritual rituals. Instead of allowing individuals to order their world, give meaning to their personal experiences, and offer a deeper understanding of

who they are, these rituals help individuals close themselves off from their families and communities, to remain locked up by guilt and secrecy. The way these chapters end questions the tension between the self and the community in the process of personal transformation. The interlude attempts to show that personal rituals also have the power to create miracles and they may, indeed, have the power to bring about transformation, healing, and hope. “Night Talkers,” “The Bridal Seamstress,” “Monkey Tails,” and “The Funeral Singer” present readers with a glimpse into the experiences of those whose lives have been scarred by Ka’s father or other Macoutes. Despite the real or figurative sins of these fathers, each of these short stories illustrate the miracles of forgiveness, of reconciliation, and healing in the bleakest situations.

When the story comes full circle in the last story, “The Dew Breaker,” Danticat focuses once again on Ka and her father. The reader is offered a glimpse into the soul of the dew breaker, learning how this now harmless father became a Macoute in the first place. It becomes clear that the quiet barber who now leads an ordinary life in New York has always existed. In his own way, he too was a victim of Duvalier’s dictatorship, transformed by this regime into a monster. In the end, it is up to Ka what to do with what she has learned. Will she decide like Aline to dedicate her life’s work to documenting this dark chapter of Haitian history through her art? It seems possible, as the text ends and she hangs up on her mother mid-conversation. They had just been discussing her father’s confession when that familiar puppet-master sensation forced her to lower the phone—the puppet-master sensation is Ka’s inspiration to sculpt.

Like Aline from “Bridal Seamstress,” who discovers her journalistic calling, Ka seems at the end of the book to find her artistic calling. The miracle of forgiveness and

reconciliation that Anne hopes for between her daughter and her husband may become possible if Ka uses her art to understand and, more importantly, make meaning out of her father's story. As kindred spirits, Ka's and the former Macoute's future depend on Ka's willingness to forgive her father. The spiritual rituals shared by this family, specifically those that Ka and her father shared in the museum, prepare her for this moment where she may allow her father permission to forgive himself, by first forgiving him. As his Ka, his guide to the afterlife, this is her divine purpose in his life. And for Ka, the dew breaker becomes the one who allows her to remain open to the influences of her inspiration.

Since the ending of the first chapter, "The Book of the Dead," can also be interpreted as the conclusion of *The Dew Breaker*, Ka's narrative in that chapter is critical to the understanding of the open-ended conclusion of the this family story. As Ka and her father are driving away from Fonteneau's Floridian home and are about to drive back north to New York, Ka sincerely wishes she could "give my father whatever he'd been seeking telling me his secret" (Danticat 131). But gradually, she begins to realize that one of the things he seeks from Ka is understanding, sympathy, and the recognition of who he really is. She finally grasps the reasons he never seemed to belong to their local Haitian-American community was because he deliberately marginalized their small family. His greatest wish was to remain hidden and avoid Haitians who might recognize him as a former Macoute:

I had always thought that my father's only ordeal was that he'd left his country and moved to a place where everything from the climate to the language was so unlike his own, a place where he never quite seemed to fit in, never appeared to belong. The only thing I can grasp now... is why the unfamiliar might have been so comforting, rather than distressing, to my father. And why he has never

wanted the person he was, is, permanently documented in any way. He taught himself to appreciate the enormous weight of permanent markers by learning about the Ancient Egyptians. He had gotten to know them, through their crypts and monument, in a way that he wanted no one to know him, no one except my mother and me, we, who are now *his kas, his good angels, his masks* against his own face (Danticat 34).

Ka's sculpture is a permanent documentation of who her father was and continues to be. The scar that the dew breaker bears on his face assures that his past will always be stamped on his body. Ka's participation in paternally linked rituals prepared her for this key moment in which she would discover that she is the daughter of a Macoute---a moment in which she would be called upon to share her father's secret past and offer him the forgiveness and protection he needs. Once both of his *kas* are privy to his secrets, the former dew breaker hopes that both his daughter and wife will serve as shields, masks against his own sins. In this context, both daughter and mother are the father's bridge to forgiveness and re-integration into the broader Haitian-American community.

In this chapter, I analyzed Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* in order to explore how the quality of father-daughter relationships is premised upon rituals that articulate affection, protection, and revelation. Although patriarchy and fathers themselves have been duly criticized, feminist thinkers and artists have unfortunately forgotten and obscured some of the histories and narratives that exalt the more nurturing qualities that sometimes accompany fathering, and the fathering of daughters in particular. In the next chapter, I look at what happens when fathers are absent or their legacies are abhorrent through an examination of Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*. How do

daughters deal with repugnant and traumatic paternal histories that endeavor to re-enslave their psyches and devour their subjectivities?

CHAPTER 2

Liberating the “Pages of Hysteria”: Daughters, Healing, and Ritualistic Art

In this chapter I shift my focus from the relatively recent trauma in Haiti to the centuries-old oppression of African slavery in the Americas. I also move my analytical lens from an exploration of the father-daughter relationship within the context of modern immigrant families to a context that embraces intergenerational family ties. Using Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* I examine the ways a daughter uses art to respond to a legacy of psychic wounding brought about by sexual concubinage to and exploitation by her ancestral master-father. Jones’s protagonist and narrator, Ursa Corregidora, uses storytelling, the re-enactment of archetypal relationships, and the performance of the blues to speak back to unyielding legacies of family violence.

The collective memories of the Corregidora women are deeply marked by their psychosexual history as slaves. These memories have such a relentless hold on their psyches that they follow these women from a Brazilian plantation to the state of Kentucky, where they live in a rural setting from the early to mid-twentieth century. The collective memories of slavery in Brazil remain vivid, persisting through ritualized storytelling. In this chapter I examine the many complex ways that intergenerational rituals can haunt and endure beyond geographical borders. Through psychic confrontations with the father figures in her family, Ursa forges her own brand of ritualistic art to achieve healing, extend forgiveness, articulate resistance, and ultimately assert agency.

Jones's novel depicts the lives of four generations of women haunted by sexual and psychological abuse endured at the hands of their Brazilian master, Simon Corregidora. Ursa is a blues singer who understands that in her family, daughters are born for the purpose of "bearing witness." Great Gram, the matriarch of Ursa's family, ensures that each female descendent was impressed with the memory of the hideous sins Simon committed against the bodies and minds of his female slaves. Bearing witness becomes an uncanny compulsion; each woman must repeatedly recount the story, passing it on from mother to daughter. When men join the family as husbands and lovers, they complain about the storytelling ritual, interpreting it as a twisted love story between Great Gram and Simon Corregidora, a conflation of love and hate.

The coexistence of contradictory emotions reflects Jones's own interest in the idea that "people can hold two different emotions simultaneously."⁸⁶ The tension caused by this simultaneity is interspersed throughout the novel and is most clearly illustrated when it abuts the tension between confrontation and forgiveness. In *Corregidora*, confrontation and forgiveness *together* lead to freedom from the past. Indeed, these two concepts are indispensable to the lives of many contemporary descendents of slaves who must often improvise strategies with which to confront a dysfunctional and painful past. It is uncomfortable for people to retrace their steps when they lead back to places of terror and abuse.

As one of the most powerful storytellers in contemporary African American literature, Gayl Jones has long been interested in depicting the intimate histories of

⁸⁶ See Claudia Tate's interview with Gayl Jones in Casey Clabough, *Gayl Jones: The Language of Voice and Freedom in Her Writings* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2008), 148.

families, men, and women through the use of a unique language that relies primarily on black vernacular forms. Jones's first novel, *Corregidora*, appeared in 1975 when she was twenty-six years old. *Corregidora* is paradigmatic of the interplay among the three most prominent elements of her *oeuvre*: Afro-diasporic histories, psychology, and language. *Eva's Man*,⁸⁷ Jones's second novel, is about a psychically wounded young woman who is sitting in a jail cell reflecting on the events that led to her confinement. Her third work of fiction, *White Rat*,⁸⁸ is a collection of short stories written in the dialect of the street in order to depict the lives of the disenfranchised members of society, struggling for some modicum of dignity. Together, these first three works help define Jones's political concerns as a writer. While some reviewers such as John Wideman and Valerie Gray Lee praised Jones's work by highlighting her masterful fusion of vernacular, erotic, and political themes, others have remained unsure what to make of her fiction.⁸⁹ Her interest in dysfunctional intimate relationships coupled with her emphasis on oral traditions produced narratives that readers find shocking, and at times, viscerally disturbing. Jones's use of explicit language, sexual images, and overt violence amplifies and prolongs this discomfort.

Some reviewers of Jones's work have sought explanations for their uneasy reaction by establishing a correlation between Jones's life and her fiction. But as an extremely private person, Jones discourages this conjecture, believing her art should live independently of its creator. Since she refuses to divulge but scarce biographical

⁸⁷ Gayl Jones, *Eva's Man* (New York: Beacon Press, 1976).

⁸⁸ Gayl Jones, *White Rat* (New York: Random, 1977).

⁸⁹ John Wideman, "Frame and Dialect: The Evolution of the Black Voice in American Literature," *American Poetry Review* 5 (September/October 1976), 34-37. Valerie Gray Lee, "The Use of Folktale in Novels By Black Women Writers," *CLA Journal* 23 (1980), 266-272.

information, reviewers and critics seeking to link art and artist often come away disappointed. However, it is known that Gayl Jones was born on November 23, 1949 in Lexington, Kentucky. She left Kentucky to attend Connecticut College and then Brown University. Over time, she received a number of fellowships in support of her research and writing: in 1975 she received the Howard Foundation Award, in 1976 she won a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and in 1977 and 1979 she received awards from The Michigan Society of Fellows. Jones's promising career was supported by well-known writers and intellectuals. Toni Morrison was the editor for Jones's *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man*. Jones held a position as an Assistant Professor of English and African-American and African Studies at the University of Michigan until the early 1980s. After leaving Michigan, Jones has continued to live a very private life while publishing works of fiction and literary criticism. Interest in her work continues to grow, perhaps due to Jones's thematic concerns, such as the articulation of slavery, globalization, and mythopoeia, each of which has become especially relevant in contemporary scholarship throughout the Afro-diaspora. In a nutshell, this is the entirety of Jones's known biography.

Jones's scholarly pursuits are rooted in a sort of literary multiculturalism. Her concern with folk forms from around the world and her focus on the histories of black peoples in the Americas has led her to study the work of those she calls "storytellers" (Hemingway, Gaines, and Chaucer) and "fictioneers" (Joyce and Toomer). Jones regards Cervantes as belonging to both of these two categories.⁹⁰ Jones's repeated reflection on the history of slavery and race-based oppression in Latin America is

⁹⁰ See Claudia Tate's interview with Gayl Jones in Clabough, *Gayl Jones*, 146.

clearly displayed in her poems. In the 1980s, Jones published three collections of poetry that develop fictional voices from Brazilian colonial history.⁹¹ In her book *Bridging the Americas*, Brazilian scholar Stelamaris Coser remarks that Jones's *Song For Anninho* signals a type of cross-cultural solidarity based on gender and race.⁹² Producing fiction rooted in questions of gender and race in order to represent the often marginalized past of Afro-diasporic women, then, lies at the crux of Jones's literary agenda. Jones's fictional enterprise reflects her non-binary, anti-insular, all-inclusive posture.

As literary activist for a "freer voice" in black artistic production, Jones, like Paul Laurence Dunbar and Zora Neale Hurston before her, advocates for a break from DuBois's "double consciousness" and offers a "multivocal" and multi-linguistic approach as an alternative paradigm. The idea that blacks possess a "double consciousness" was first proposed by DuBois in his 1903 book, *The Soul of Black Folks*. According to Du Bois, blacks in the United States were caught between a self-conception as Americans and people of African ancestry:

One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings... two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁹³

This notion of "two-ness" is exactly what Jones, Dunbar, and Hurston were striving to move beyond in their works. These writers embraced a concept of black subjectivity that itself promoted a pluricultural or diasporic configuration of the self rather than a

⁹¹ See Gayl Jones, *Song for Anninho* (Detroit: Lotus Press, 1981); *The Hermit-Woman* (Detroit: Lotus Press, 1983); and *Xarque and Other Poems* (Detroit: Lotus Press, 1985).

⁹² Stelamaris Coser, *Bridging the Americas: The Literature of Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995), 123.

⁹³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds., *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 694.

binary one. This vision of the self is highly aware of, engaged with, and inclusive of vernacular traditions and histories of people of African descent living beyond the geographical borders of the United States.

In her 1991 collection of critical essays, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature*,⁹⁴ Jones presents herself as well-versed in oral traditions from around the world. It is this interest in exploring international literatures that motivates her to move away from the limiting vision of DuBois and propose instead, a multivocal approach to textual interpretation and appreciation. For Jones, this is premised on a fusion of literary and oral genres, both spoken and musical.⁹⁵ One further dimension of Jones's literary legacy that is rarely mentioned, but also echoes the legacies of Hurston and Dunbar, is her desire to extend the multivocality of African American literature, making it more "multilocal," more Afro-diasporic. This multilocality privileges orality and conjures the histories of the global movement of peoples of African ancestry.

Written in the first person as a stream-of-consciousness, *Corregidora* reveals Jones's interest in the connections among African diasporic communities in the New World, Afro-Brazilian history, the importance of oral genres that safeguard communal memory, and the powerful role that intimate family settings play in the transmission of suppressed histories. In a passage that effectively summarizes the novel, our daughter-protagonist Ursa Corregidora articulates what Jones sets out to do through her writing:

I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life and theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the

⁹⁴ Gayl Jones, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

⁹⁵ Jones, *Liberating Voices*, 13-14.

new world. I thought of the girl who had to sleep with her master and mistress. *Her father, the master. Her daughter's father.* The father of her daughter's daughter. How many generations? Days that were pages of hysteria. Their survival depended on *suppressed hysteria*.⁹⁶

Ursa's declaration connects her to the larger community who suffered under slavery in Brazil during the late nineteenth century. In the span of more than two hundred years of slavery, Africans and their descendants found creative means to survive the proliferation of violence, trauma, and silence. The African American vernacular traditions of Spirituals and work songs testify to the fact that songs become for Africans the supreme trope of liberation. Branded by the violent meeting of multiple worlds, slaves often found healing in maintaining the traditions of song transmitted to them by previous generations. Song also became a way of remembering, testifying, and commemorating ancestral survival. In this instance, commemoration inspires the type of song that will both heal and liberate suppressed histories that threaten to drive the shackled spirit to madness and hellish hysteria. Days are the metaphorical representation of and pages of a historical record. The generation of offspring and the generation of song become not only a means of recording pain, but also more significantly, a way of countering and surviving the present and ensuring the future. Driven by a system that dehumanizes both slave and slaveholder, father-daughter relationships cannot but be negatively shaped by absence and sexual taboos. This dyad forms what is uniquely designated in *Corregidora* as a "daughter-concubine" relationship characterized by incest between master-father and his interracial slave-

⁹⁶ Jones, *Corregidora*, 59. Please note that all other references to this book will occur within the text, with the page numbers noted in parentheses.

daughter. Incest complicates the perspective in which fathers are viewed as a bridge leading daughters to embrace their communal selves.

In Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*, immigration is the socio-historical force that complicates the father's role as bridge to the communal self, while in Jones's *Corregidora*, the socio-historical element that shapes this relationship is slavery. The enslavement of Africans in the Americas precluded the possibility of forming male and female family relationships, rendering kinship tenuous and permeable. *Corregidora* speaks to the dysfunctional effects of slavery and its legacy on kinship and family histories. Jones's text was published at a time when African Americans in the United States were facing the necessity of erasing the shame of the slave past and unearthing forgotten stories that reveal ancestry and solidify a sense of community. Neo-slave narratives, popular in the 1970s, often focused on the consequences of the slave past on the lives and souls of modern women and men.⁹⁷ Black women writers of the early post-civil rights era frequently emphasized the family setting to articulate the unspeakable (or, at least, unspoken) emotions silenced by the passing of time.⁹⁸ There was also a tendency to focus on the specific experiences of women, foremothers, mothers, and daughters. Although men and father stories seem relegated to the background in neo-slave narratives written by women, how fathers are represented still contributes to a deeper understanding of how black women use the past to fashion themselves, and *for* themselves, a viable world. Seeking self-determination, Ursa

⁹⁷ Margaret Walker, *Jubilee* (New York: Bantam Books, 1966); Charles Johnson, *Oxherding Tale* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada* (New York: Random House, 1976); Shirley Ann Williams, *Dessa Rose* (New York: Morrow, 1986).

⁹⁸ Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (Garden City, NJ: Double Day, 1979); Phyllis A. Perry, *Stigmata* (New York: Hyperion, 1998); Morrison, *Beloved*.

Corregidora must confront the violent fathers that are an integral part of her genealogy and identity.

Two types of paternal legacies are represented in *Corregidora*: the memory of the master as father and the heritage of the African father or (ex)slave father. Jones shows how the master-patriarch transmits problematic legacies that traumatize the lives of three generations of his female descendants. On the other hand, slave-fathers have virtually no right to their children and rarely have solid or long-term relationships with their descendants. These men have only fragments of their story of origin to take with them wherever uncertain destiny might lead. This precariousness extends to the inability to form a lasting, independent family in which slave-fathers might fulfill the ancient role of protector and communal knowledge-sower. In *Corregidora*, African fathers are forcibly absent from the lives of their sons and daughters.

All fathers, whether slave or master, are, in *Corregidora*, associated with the repressive effects and affects of family rituals. Unlike in *The Dew Breaker*, fathers do not promote the growth of the communal self, but instead disconnect their descendants from community. Rituals for the Corregidora clan are linked to a haunting side of paternal history, rooted in the perverse system of African enslavement in the Americas.

The protagonist, Ursa, is a blues singer living in Kentucky in the 1940s. She grows up in a household with three generations of women—Great-Gram, Grandmama, and Mama—in a small and predominantly black rural town. The women live without the physical presence of men. The thread that binds and imprisons all four women is the legacy of Simon Corregidora, a Portuguese seaman turned plantation owner and

whoremonger in Brazil. Ursa's great grandmother is one of Corregidora's African slaves who were taken

out of the field when she was still a child and put her to work in his whorehouse... She was to go out or he would bring the men in and the money they gave her she was to turn over to him. There were other women he used like that. She was the pretty little one with the almond eyes and coffee-bean skin, his favorite. "A good little piece. My best. Dorita. Little gold piece (Jones 10).

"Corregidora" originates from the Portuguese and Spanish words *corregir*, meaning to correct, and *dora*, gift. The name "Corregidora" could be read as "she that corrects; emends; punishes"—Ursa certainly fulfills this function in the novel. Corregidora as a choice of family name for Jones's protagonists may possibly evoke the author's desire to underscore the ambivalent feelings that sometimes exist in all types of relationships, including the one between master and slave. This idea reappears in Octavia Butler's neo-slave narrative, *Kindred* (1979). Eventually, Simon and Great Gram produced a daughter, Grandmama, and, after the Brazilian Imperial Crown's emancipation of slaves, Great Gram continued to live on the plantation. After she commits an act against Simon for which he wants to kill her, Great Gram runs away to the United States, leaving her daughter behind to face Simon's wrath. Having settled in Louisiana, Great Gram secretly returns for their daughter in 1906. She finds that their daughter is now eighteen years old and pregnant with a baby: Simon's child and grandchild.

As a "Corregidora woman," Ursa is brought up hearing stories of the great grandfather who is also her grandfather. She learns Simon used sexual violence and isolation to keep a tight rein on his female slaves. Ursa remembers how stories of her great grandfather were told to her several times a day since she was about five years old. The telling itself becomes a sort of repressive ritual that links the present and

traumatic past, spanning Brazil, Louisiana, and Kentucky. Through the ritualized telling of the Corregidora story, Ursa learns to hate her great grandfather, feeling his violent grasp not only on her foremothers, but on her own life. As an adult, Ursa begins to recognize the Corregidora legacy for what it is: a collection of fragmented, haunting, and powerful family stories that re-enslaves their collective psyche and isolates each generation from its immediate community. For Ursa, this paternal inheritance both silences daughters and overshadows the presence of potential life-long male companions, propelling them out of the women's lives. White male domination within the context of plantation culture meant that men of African descent were often pushed out of slave women's lives.

On the Corregidora plantation, as in many other plantations throughout the Americas, stories abounded of African fathers, husbands, and lovers pushed aside so that the master might invade, violate, and possess their daughters and female companions. Female slaves who resisted the masters' supremacy paid a high price. Great Gram tells how Simon would not allow some of his slave women to interact with male slaves. He found it a waste to have his slave women, dark- or light-skinned, have relationships with dark-skinned males. When they did not pay with their lives, males paid the price of resistance with the stripes of the lash, while women endured sexual violence as punishment. Great Gram relates the constant anxiety she experiences under Simon's threats to remove her from her private room and place her in a room where five or more slave-prostitutes service their guests. It is not modesty that incites her fear but the fact that exposure to those rooms increases the likelihood of contracting syphilis. The quality of the prevalent relationship between the African female slaves (Great

Gram) at the mercy of the white male slaveholder (Simon) shapes the male-female dynamics between the U.S.-born Corregidora women and their mates forever.

This relationship dwells in the historical memory of various diasporic African communities as one that dehumanizes through the abuse of power. The collective memory of a world organized by the master-slave relationship has transmitted the ancestral compulsion to reenact the violence of the past. Transcending time and space, the relationship between white male slaveholder and African female slave becomes archetypal. Ursa's family history is illustrative of the power of this social connection, plagued by mistrust and driven by fear. The master-class fears rebellion and the slaves dread cruelty. Given the existence of runaway communities like the *quilombos* of Brazil and news of occasional revolts all over the New World, it is in Simon Corregidora's best interest to protect his plantation by preventing his slaves from forming any type of bond among themselves. Great Gram relates to Mama the terrible fate of a teenage slave who risked Simon's wrath by befriending her (Jones 126). This young slave felt close enough to Great Gram that he could confide in her and share his secret plan to run away and join a community of renegade slaves in Palmares (Quilombo dos Palmares is the most emblematic of the *quilombos*. Located in the Northeastern state of Alagoas, Palmares lasted roughly between 1580 to 1710). Great Gram discouraged the young man, reminding him that those runaway communities had stopped existing centuries earlier. When Simon became suspicious and jealous of their friendship, the young slave decided to flee the plantation. Through this experience, Great Gram realized the futility of forming un-sanctioned friendships; associating with others only brought cruelty into her life and those of the people she befriended. Now, as the great matriarch of a family,

she teaches that isolation insures survival. Corregidora women have inherited a legacy of isolation from others, particularly men in their immediate communities. The master-class's classification and treatment of slaves based on skin color also contributed, at least in part, to intra-racial conflicts and the rupture of kinship among slaves.

Part of what Great Gram learned with Simon is that it is better to be selective and favor fairer-skinned males as partners. This perspective passed on from masters to slaves reflects the colonial and endemic effort in some Latin American countries to erase African phenotypic traits and cultural traditions. This cultural strategy contributed to the obfuscation and further suppression of paternal histories in the African diaspora, pushing the figure of the lost African father closer to oblivion. Some slave concubines, such as those in situations like Great Gram's, were coerced by the master-class to believe in the undesirability of African characteristics. Such slave women were taught to take friendship or other expressions of interest by their male counterparts as an affront. This perspective is transmitted between generations in the Corregidora story—even Mama and Ursa are expected to continue this tradition of isolation from dark-skinned men. Ursa's foremothers internalized the skin-color hierarchy implemented by the master-class, and it spurred division, false-consciousness, and self-hatred among the slaves and their descendents. Self-hatred, isolation, and loneliness also contributed to the mounting hysteria that represented the suppressed emotions of female slaves living in psychosexual bondage. In his article, "Women and Society in Colonial Brazil," A.J.R. Russell-Wood gives a stereotypical description of the role of black or mulatto women in colonial Brazil. Russell-Wood writes,

Her domestic duties were irrevocably tied to her sexual role as the plaything of adolescent sons, the butt for the cruelty and sadism of jealous white wives, or the object of the affections of the masters of the house.⁹⁹

Great Gram's life in *Corregidora* is emblematic of the psychic wounding resulting from the objectification of black women's bodies and mind while in bondage. For these women, life was a book whose chapters were written in what Ursa calls "pages of hysteria." Such psychically oppressive lives in isolation without their brothers, husbands, and sons were akin to living in purgatory. Fathers, traditionally given the role of protector, did not exist. Just as Great Gram practically omits the histories of the sons she bears in slavery, the idea of black men as involved fathers has often remained virtually absent in fiction written by Afro-diasporic women, and this is particularly the case in neo-slave narratives.

After four generations of isolation from the presence of involved males and father figures, the *Corregidora* women find it hard to maintain a healthy relationship with people of color in their Kentucky community. A sense of claustrophobia is transplanted from *Corregidora*'s Brazilian plantation to their Kentucky home. Being from a family in which father figures are either absent or dysfunctional, Ursa finds herself forming and accepting inadequate and abusive relationships. Simon *Corregidora*, a symbol of control, violence, and hatred, continues to scar the psyches of his female kin. His memory constricts, haunts, isolates, and worst of all, lures his descendants into being implicated in their own abuse by the men who reproduce his meaning in their lives. It is only much later in the novel that readers come to understand that Martin, Ursa's father, had been forcibly made absent in his daughter's

⁹⁹ A.J.R. Russell-Wood, "Women and Society in Colonial Brazil," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 9(1) (May 1977), 1-34.

life. He was pushed away due to the twisted and haunting family legend rooted in racial and sexual domination.

Jones conveys how the legacy of slavery has made it possible to distort various types of kinship. It is not shocking that certain taboos abound in an atmosphere where interracial sex is tied to illicit behavior. While viewed as taboo in dominant societies of the Americas, incest was an acceptable way for masters to violate their own daughters—as slaves, these offspring were not really considered or treated as children, but more like property. So one traumatic element of the *Corregidora* story is how incest further corrupts the complex bond between master-fathers and slave-daughters. As both Simon's possession and kin, Ursa and her foremothers find it difficult to abort the yoke of the slaveholder-as-father legacy. They are virtually possessed by his spirit, even as they are now free in body. That Simon remains simultaneously the venerated and hated patriarch of Ursa's family for four generations highlights the deep legacy of African slave women as the sexual property of white men. Ursa feels her great grandfather haunting her relationships, her conversations, and her dreams.

The *Corregidora* women are captives of this paradoxical relationship with Simon and his memory. Feeling his presence overshadowed by the perverted patriarch, Ursa's father, Martin, challenges Great Gram and Grandmama: "[H]ow much was hate for *Corregidora* and how much was love" (Jones 80)? Martin is ostracized. Grandmama insults him using racially hateful words to show her hate for him as a dark-skinned man. The physical violence that Simon used to control his slave may have left visible scars on the first generation, but psychological violence has long outlived him and the official burning of written records of slavery in Brazil. This legacy of violence left behind by

white domination is reflected in the way men and women of African descent sometimes treat each other. As if also haunted by Simon's spirit of white supremacy, the characters in *Corregidora* have lives that are filled with aggression, intimidation, and violence.

The traumatic results of this family's legacy are illustrated in their tendency to conflate paternal and spousal roles. Ursa is so brainwashed by the story of her family that by the time she reaches adulthood that she unconsciously assumes the tragic role of protagonist in the *Corregidora* legend. Since, as Alex Haley's *Queen* demonstrates, it was not unusual for white plantation-owners to simultaneously occupy the role of father and slave-master, it makes sense that women were left with inadequate role models of husbands and fathers.¹⁰⁰ The absence of adequate paternal figures is sometimes reflected in the quality of relationships that some contemporary women have with their husbands.

Corregidora's abuse of his slave women centered so much on the physical aspect of their sexuality, that there was little room for love, true companionship, or potential kinship. The resulting effect of this insidious history is a doubling of lover and oppressor and a blurring of the line between the social role of father and husband. Mutt, Ursa's first husband, is angry that she refuses to submit to his demand that she ends her career as a blues singer at Happy's Café. After nights of tormenting and embarrassing her at her workplace, Mutt drags her out of the building. Their fight ends with Mutt pushing Ursa down a flight of stairs. Ursa only regains consciousness at a hospital, having lost her fetus and undergone a hysterectomy. After this incident, Mutt and

¹⁰⁰ Alex Haley and David Stevens, *Alex Haley's Queen: The Story of an American Family* (New York: W. Morrow, 1993).

Simon become competing targets for Ursa's rage. As Ursa recovers, Tadpole, one of her acquaintances at Happy's, takes care of her. She soon accepts Tadpole's marriage proposal hoping to get past the reality of having lost her baby and uterus because of Mutt.

Immediately after experiencing an intimate moment with her second husband, Tadpole, Ursa has a fantastic, but meaningful dream. The sequences of her dream establish for the reader the blurring of the two distinctive psychic spaces that Ursa relegates to the most dominant men in her life, Mutt and Simon Corregidora. She first dreams of having a very angry conversation with Mutt, in which he warns her that her new husband will demand what she may not be able to give. She uses violent words to rebuke him. But then her dream morphs into a scene in which she effortlessly gives birth to an unrecognizable being with wings and claws. Ursa asks: "Who are you? Who have I born" (Jones 77)? This is a powerful moment in the novel as it emphasizes the ritualistic dialogue that takes place between self and history. Ursa has just done the impossible: She has borne her paternal ancestor, Simon Corregidora, the emblem of her haunting past. This nightmarishly gruesome creature that has bruised and crowded the wombs of generations of women in her family threatens to usurp her future, but the symbolic birthing of her great grandfather-grandfather also places Ursa in a powerful position. She could kill Simon.

At this point in the novel, Ursa embarks on her journey toward healing, self-knowledge, and self-empowerment. She gains the confidence necessary to face her incestuous family history and voluntarily claims it as part of who she is: "I am Ursa Corregidora. I have tears for eyes. I was made to touch my past at an early age. I

found it in my mother's tiddies. In her milk. Let no one pollute my music. I will dig out their temples. I will pluck out their eyes" (Jones 77). Yet, Ursa's acceptance of the Corregidora legacy comes only on her own terms. She channels her complex emotions of anger, humiliation, and isolation into her art, resolving to fight back with her music. She will no longer allow her paternal ancestry to interfere with what she deems important. Readers do not doubt anyone standing in her way will be brought down. Unlike her foremothers, Ursa consciously chooses not to be subsumed by her traumatic history, instead using her art to transform pain into meaning.

The intrusion of Simon Corregidora's memory into the intimate spaces of these women's psyches breeds jealousy and evokes aggressive behavior in their mates. Ursa's husbands do not see the connection between Ursa's compulsion to retell the family story, her craft as a blues singer, and her will to resist and survive a traumatic genealogy. Consequently, Ursa's husbands act passive-aggressively toward her past. In one scene, Mutt is upset that men stare at Ursa when she is on stage. She tries to playfully set his mind at ease by telling him that he is acting like a crazy man. When she suddenly turns their conversation toward the Corregidora story, Mutt becomes angry: "I'm tired of hearing about Corregidora's women. Why do you have to remember that old bastard anyway? ...You one of them... If you wasn't one of them you wouldn't like them mans watching after you" (Jones 154). At another instance, Mutt comments that Ursa must not really be his woman since she decided not to take his last name, keeping Corregidora's instead. Both Mutt, Ursa's husband, and Martin, Ursa's father, feel nothing but hatred and jealousy toward their spouses's obsession with the memory of Simon Corregidora. The men's familiarity with the Corregidora story leads

to viewing their women with jealousy and suspicion. Both Martin and Mutt believe their spouses are complicit in the violence visited upon them and begin to view them with contempt. In this way, slave women involved with their masters often find their victimization compromised. In this instance, Jones establishes a parallel between slave women and the Corregidora women when Mutt comes into Happy's Café and simulates a slave trader selling a female slave at the auction block with Ursa as the one up for sale (Jones 159).

Ursa suffers a similar betrayal and humiliation at the hands of her second husband, Tadpole. When Ursa shares the Corregidora story with him, he encourages her to switch her focus from Corregidora to her father instead. He finds it curious that Ursa never mentions her father, carries her maternal family name rather than her paternal (or even a shared name with her husband), and cannot stop retelling fragments of her foremothers's stories: "You never talk about your daddy neither. It's always them women. What's your daddy like?" Tadpole asks his question in the present tense, assuming Ursa must have an active relationship with her father. But her answer is telling: "I don't know." Tadpole finds this surprising and shows his incredulity and mild irritation: "What do you mean you don't know" (Jones 80)? Ursa responds with an anecdote that her grandmother fabricated about her absent father when as a child she wondered about Martin. Ursa relays the story in the same tone of apathy that her foremothers must have told it, saying her parents's relationship is regarded much like a shameful family secret: "Most of which I know my Grandmama told me and told me not to tell my mama she told me. Mama never would have told me anything" (Jones 80). While Martin and Mama's story is silenced and made inaccessible to Ursa, the

story of Great Gram and Simon occupies an important part of her life. She unconsciously, then, models her relationship with men after the only one she's known: a master and slave-concubine connection. The story of her plantation ancestors, over time, comes to occupy the role of family legend, one that Ursa feels compelled to re-enact over and over again with her own intimate relationships.

Given that violence was at the heart of Simon Corregidora's relationship with his female-slave kin, Ursa's relationships with her husbands cannot help but be characterized by trauma and violence. Ursa's short-lived relationship with Tadpole ends just as brutally as her relationship with Mutt had. In this instance, however, it is not physical violence that separates the two but aggressive words, humiliation, and infidelity. Tadpole spurns Ursa, taunting her and aiming to undermine her self-image by equating the loss of her womb with her loss of value as a desirable woman. What Tadpole does not realize is that Ursa, having been touched by worse moments, continues to move toward self-knowledge and self-healing. With this chapter of her life closed, Ursa starts discovering how similar her treatment by men is to the way her father had treated her mother on their last encounter years earlier. All three men in the novel, Martin, Mutt, and Tadpole, allow violence and utter disgust for the haunting patriarch to dictate the quality of their relationships with the Corregidora women.

The blurring of father and husband is further complicated by the weak line that separates the desire and hatred the Corregidora women feel for their abusive mates. Ursa's relationships with Mutt, Tadpole, and Simon are characterized by latent anger that drains her ability to experience intimacy and trust, echoing earlier instances in the relationship between the older Corregidora women and the Portuguese master-father

they resent. At the same time, these women appear to accept and even feel affection for Simon. After slavery is abolished, Great Gram continues to live with Simon, and Grandmama accepts Simon's supremacy over males of visible African ancestry. Grandmama rejects Ursa's father because he is dark-skinned. She appropriates the skin-color hierarchy imposed by their master-lover-father. But the most complex of paradoxes in this story is the compulsion to transmit Simon's memory and legacy by bearing a female heir.

In *Corregidora*, the impulse to bear witness (and bear witnesses) is the glue that binds daughters to paternal legacies over the span of generations. Yet, Great Gram's motive for telling and retelling their past seem to be a belief that the act of sharing is an act of agency. The telling ritual is how Great Gram contests injustices perpetrated by those more powerful than she is. Early in the novel, Great Gram shows a great sense of urgency to leave a record of "days that were pages of hysteria" (Jones 59). She is compelled to leave human evidence and oral records that testify to the inhumane treatment she and other slaves endured. Her act serves as a substitute for the written documents that were burnt in order to erase the evidence that slavery ever took place in Brazil. She becomes angry when Ursa, a mere five-year-old, questions the truth of her story:

"You telling the truth, Great Gram?" She slaps me. "When I'm telling you something don't you ever ask if I'm lying. Because they didn't want to leave no evidence of what they done-so it couldn't be held against them. And I'm leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence... That's why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn't be no evidence to hold up against them" (Jones 14).

It is difficult to say in which court of law this evidence would be brought, but this mission seems to give Great Gram a sense of purpose. Perhaps she believes that future generations would have a greater sense of justice than do the masters and the slaves of her time.

Although the ultimate purpose of telling the story appears to be to a liberating act—to bear witness to the atrocities of the slave-masters—Great Gram’s reproduction and her compulsive desire to retell the story, ironically re-enslaves her female descendants. The obligation “to make generations” becomes a traumatic act that feeds another traumatic family ritual: the telling of the story and the archetypal re-enactment of the male master and female slave relationship. Ursa feels profoundly imprisoned by this legacy of violence. She believes abandoning the legacy would be like amputating her arm. After all, Simon Corregidora is part of her genetic make-up. How can she escape it when as an infant she found it in her mother’s milk (Jones 77)? She understands the implications of this inheritance and is aware of its power to shape her identity and her very perception of the world: “We’re all consequences of something. Stained with another’s past as well as our own. Their past in my blood. I’m a blood” (Jones 45). For Ursa, identity is constructed in a communal context, and thus includes the assumption of the past and its inherent burdens.

As it does for Ka and her father, the past burdens the present relationship between the Corregidora daughters and their fathers, but there is a difference. In the *Dew Breaker*, it is a secret past that hangs between father and daughter. In *Corregidora*, it is the over-exposure to a violent past that problematizes the daughter’s relationship with her absent father and her all-too-present forefather. This strange

combination of paternal absence and presence contributes to Ursa's isolation and her apparently apathetic personality. Community is often portrayed in African American literature as a sort of foster family, yet Ursa does not consider her immediate community as a type of extended family. Her acquaintances with Catherine, Jeffy, and Sal Cooper represent Ursa's inability to form and maintain bonds of solidarity and kinship. Living in a town where she has no family, Ursa does not seek a sense of belonging among those with whom she comes into contact. Catherine (Cat) Lawson visits Ursa at the hospital after Mutt's attack and urges her to move into her home. Cat and Tadpole care for Ursa as she recovers. But after accidentally discovering that Cat is attracted to women, Ursa becomes anxious about her own sexuality and spurns Cat's friendship. When Cat tearfully confides to Ursa the humiliations she suffered at the hands of her white male employer, Ursa offers no emotional support. Instead she asks indifferently: "[Y]ou over your hysteria now?" She frostily observes of her friend: "[Cat] was waiting for an embrace that I refused to give"(Jones 66). Just as Great Gram made it a point to steer clear of Corregidora's other prostituting slaves, Ursa avoids female friendships and does not view women as confidants.

Ursa's penchant for indifference, self-isolation, and frigidity is unsurprising. As the family lore goes, Simon Corregidora forced his slave-women into prostitution, coercing them to "make love to anyone *so that they could not love anyone*" (Jones 104). Although slaves understood it was dangerous to love anything or anyone too much, they did so anyway. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, for instance, Sethe and Paul D share their memories on what it was like to love while living under the yoke of slavery. Sethe tells Paul D that maternal love is thwarted by this oppressive system, but how against all

odds, her love expanded after she escaped from Kentucky to join her children in Ohio: “Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn’t love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love... But when I got here... there wasn’t nobody in the world I couldn’t love if I wanted to. You know what I mean?”¹⁰¹ Paul D responds to Sethe’s question by pondering his own philosophy of love in the lives of slaves. As far as he was concerned,

you protected yourself and love small. Picked the tiniest stars out of the sky to own... grass blades, salamanders, spiders, woodpeckers... anything bigger wouldn’t do. A woman, a child, a brother, a big love like that would split you wide open in Alfred, Georgia. He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well, now, *that* was freedom. (Morrison 191)

This conditioning of desire, love, and sentimental life has repercussions that are felt in various forms of intimate relationships among people of African descent in the Americas. Through Ursa, Jones shows the powerful grasp that this legacy of brutality holds over the friendships and intimate lives of diasporic Africans. Three generations later, Corregidora’s female descendants find it challenging to experience friendship and intimacy. Ursa does not experience empathy among friends or in relationships with men. She often describes feeling numb when she is in intimate situations with her husbands. In an imagined conversation with Mutt, Ursa explains that it bothers her that she has not and will never be able to bear children. This bothers her not because she cannot fulfill the mission set forth by her great-grandmother: “It bothers me because *I can’t feel anything*” (Jones 90). Ursa is refusing to love small. She is refusing to be numb, because she realizes that to feel is a means of reaching out of oneself toward the

¹⁰¹ Morrison, *Beloved*, 190-191.

other. As Sethe, Paul D, and Great Gram express, this impulse, too, is mediated in slavery and following it can have fatal consequences. It is best to protect oneself by loving small or simply living a numb existence.

The anaesthetic effect of the Corregidora story on Ursa's family reveals the complexity of the traumatic rituals that bind these women as kin. It is in the very acts of remembering the past and the sharing of the family story that these women solidify a kinship that has transcended time and geographical space. Thus, as contradictory as it may seem, "bearing witness" means clinging to a highly ritualized transmission of painful family memory.

The neo-African tradition of venerating ancestor figures and the *loas*, or spirits of Haitian cosmology, sheds light on this commemorative impulse among the Corregidora clan. Ancestor figures and guides, such as *loas*, mediate the everyday world and the spiritual world, thereby maintaining a connection between the lives of their children and the transcendental world. In Haiti, like in other communities in the African diaspora, participants in Voodoo ceremonies pay homage to the specific *loa* to which they or their families have dedicated themselves. Similarly, the Corregidora women seem to have dedicated themselves to the spirit, memory, and totem of Simon. Just as specific dances and particular beats are used to invoke and enter into communion with the *loas*, Great Gram rocks her chair to the rhythm of her memories as a slave. Through rhythmic movements in a *loa* ceremony, a person experiences an ecstatic state, becoming possessed by a *loa*; in a like manner, each time the Corregidora women tell the story, they appear to operate at a heightened level of consciousness. The Corregidora women's experience is not unlike the intensification of physical and mental

powers experienced by a person being “mounted” by a spirit. According to scholars Alfons M. Dauer and Janheinz Jahn, the possessed feel refreshed after this experience, and the resulting effect is healthful, not harmful.¹⁰² Therefore, the experience of one being mounted by a loa cannot be described as psychosomatic phenomena, such as hysteria, neurosis, or epileptic fit. Instead, Jahn believes the ecstatic state of the possessed is akin to that which is experienced in North American Negro churches. These two collective rituals resonate the spiritual dimension of the process through which the Corregidora women remember, retell, and commemorate their slaveholding ancestor. Ursa describes this act in detail:

Great Gram sat in the rocker. I was on her lap. She told the same story over and over again. She had her hands around my waist, and I had my back to her. While she talked, I’d stare down at her hands. She would fold them and unfold them... and sometimes I’d see the sweat in her palms... It was as if the words were helping her, as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than the memory. (Jones 11)

The rocking back and forth and the folding and unfolding of the hands suggest an elemental rhythm that has two effects: First, repetition imbues the words with such efficacy that they “could be a substitute for memory,” and second, rhythmic repetition induces an ecstatic state in both the listener and storyteller. In this instance, Ursa establishes the inextricable link between memory and ritual. The connection between these two elements is strengthened further through a photo Ursa has inherited of her dysfunctional forefather, which represents a tangible piece of memory. Ursa painstakingly describes Simon’s picture to Tadpole:

I’ve got a photograph of him. One Great Gram smuggled out, I guess, so we’d know who to hate. Tall, white hair, white beard, white mustache, a old man with a cane and one of his feet turned outward, not inward, but outward. Neck bent

¹⁰² Jahn, *Muntu*, 41.

forward like he was raging at something that wasn't there. Mad Portuguese. I take it out every now and then so I won't forget what he looked like. (Jones 10).

The fact that Ursa describes her great grandfather so vividly suggests an underlying ritual of etching Simon's image into her mind. This ritualized seeing also echoes the possession by the loas, who are commonly invoked through the use of totems such as ashes, white flour, and other substances, scattered as heraldic works of art on the ground at the beginning of Voodoo rites.

But while Voodoo participants have a cathartic experience after being mounted, being ridden by the Corregidora's haunting legacy leaves Ursa disoriented, unfeeling, isolated, and raped all over again. However, claiming part of that legacy is the price of belonging to her only small community. Jahn writes, "in Africa, as in Voodoo ceremonies, a person who has never been seized, never possessed by divinity is not accepted into any cult."¹⁰³ Just as the father-daughter relationship has been perverted by slavery, Corregidora's memory becomes a distorted version of the tradition of loa possession. As Ursa attempts to reconcile family traditions and self-determination, she finally realizes that passively accepting kinship to her slaveholding great grandfather, as her mother did, is to the detriment of her own self-possession. The Corregidora story claims, possesses, and silences the life stories of black women and men and, unlike loa possession, does not provide them anything positive in return. As an artist, Ursa must perform her own exorcism of Corregidora's negative hold on her psyche. To do so she must return to the story of origin for plantation slaves.

Part of the ritualized telling of the Corregidora legacy is premised upon the fact that children already belong to Simon before they are even born. In this way Simon

¹⁰³ Janheinz, *Muntu*, 40.

literally possesses the fate of his unborn descendants. Making generations guarantees him an audience and later purveyors of the Corregidora story. Great Gram tells a sort of genesis story that describes the wretched conditions in which slaves are born on plantations of the Americas: “That’s how we all begin, remember that... A mud ditch or a slop jar or hit the floor or the ground. It’s all the same” (Jones 40). This moment in the novel can be read as a commentary of what it may have been like for mothers in bondage to give birth. The birthing of a new life, often celebrated, was a sad event for slave mothers. Mama’s experience of giving birth outside of the plantation in a consensual relationship changes the dismal tone, and more importantly, the direction of the family birth story. Unfortunately however, this transformation of the family story is deliberately excluded from the family’s ritualized storytelling. Ursa’s mother never volunteers any information about Ursa’s father and their relationship as lovers. In order to hear Mama’s story, Ursa must return to her hometown, a place where Mama continues to live a solitary life in their ancestral home after the deaths of Grandmama and Great Gram.

Mama, unlike Great Gram and Grandmama, was not forced to have children. She explains to Ursa how her body wanted to have a child and how she “knew [her] body would have a girl” (Jones 117). This is not the only way in which Mama’s life diverges from those of her predecessors. She is the first to have a lover who is not Simon Corregidora. Her relationship with Martin, an African-American male, disrupts the pre-existing male-master and female-slave/concubine paradigm with which the Corregidora women are most familiar. Mama faced Great Gram’s and Grandmama’s disapproval for her choice of mate. When Ursa was but a toddler, they were already

looking for phenotypic signs that she would be a Corregidora. Mama explains to Ursa, “Put my hand on my belly, and knew you was gonna be one of us. Little long-haired girl on my lap. You come out baldheaded though. They just kept looking at me, Mama and Gram. I knew they hated me then. Cause you come out all baldheaded. White skin before you got the little pigment you got now, and baldheaded” (Jones 117). Ursa’s skin and hair are as emblematic of her kinship to Corregidora clan as is her last name.

Although Ursa’s appearance links her to a family of biracial heritage, she, like her mother, breaks the family tradition of bearing interracial children. Her stance toward family traditions is also reflected in the music she creates. As an artist, Ursa finds she must confront her family’s traumatic legacy to demolish it and ultimately recreate a legacy worthy of posterity. In *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts* Mircea Eliade explains that “one cannot ‘repair’ the world; one must annihilate it in order to recreate it.”¹⁰⁴ Eliade believes this to be “one of the characteristics of ‘cosmic religion’ both among the primitives and among the peoples of the Ancient Near East.”¹⁰⁵ Unlike her foremothers, Ursa cannot bear a child to act as witness to the family story. However, through the blues Ursa gains an audience, surrogate witnesses with whom to share new stories. These new stories that she sings focus on the empowerment of women in their relationship to men, whether it be their fathers or husbands. The metaphoric squeezing and tightening of fists, tunnels and other passages that she sings about no longer represents the suffocation of women into silence. This constraint is transformed into a sensual metaphor for an erotic and tender embrace. Ursa sings about a train passing through a tunnel and a bird woman who takes a man on a journey and

¹⁰⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 84.

¹⁰⁵ Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, 84.

never brings him back (Jones 147). In these songs Ursa links women's empowerment to erotic violence. However, she also shows an ability to connect emotionally with both men and women in her audience when she invokes the blues diva Ma Rainey in her own her rendition of "The Broken Soul Blues" (Jones 158). In this moment, Jones summons a characteristic feature of blues music: blues notes as the medium through which a person can grieve. Through this experience of grief, one can then begin to heal, eventually reaching a place where forgiveness may become possible.

Ursa finds empowerment in the act of disarming violence. To transcend violence and heal from traumatic experiences, Ursa makes deliberately choose to embrace tenderness. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Jones reveals that while *Corregidora* emphasizes brutality, the novel also suggests tenderness as an alternative to brutality.¹⁰⁶ Although a violent family story remains the original motive for Ursa's art, the messages she shares with her listeners purge the old in order to recreate and transform the scraps into something new. Through music she transforms traumatic memory (isolation, violence, shame, silence) into a source of healing. Ursa allows the blues to function both as a medium of ritualistic destruction and creative expression. When Tate asked Jones whether *Corregidora*, like other forms of art, attempts to make sense out of chaos or merely records the chaos, Jones answered by arguing "the artistic process becomes a kind of order for the storyteller and also a way of dealing with the experience."¹⁰⁷

In *Corregidora*, the artistic process centers on the African American blues and jazz traditions. This musical form is an apt metaphor for Ursa's struggle since it is a

¹⁰⁶ Refer to Claudia Tate's interview with Gayl Jones in Clabough, *Gayl Jones*, 152.

¹⁰⁷ Clabough, *Gayl Jones*, 148.

genre that is concerned with liberation of the mind, problematic social relationships, spirituality, and individual transcendence and healing through communal interaction. In one chapter of *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins explores black women's love relationships. Her discussion of the connection between the blues and the "love and trouble" tradition leads Collins to refer to an assertion Gayl Jones made during an interview with Michael Harper: "The relationships between the men and the women I'm dealing with are blues relationships. So they're out of a tradition of 'love and trouble'... Blues talks about the simultaneity of good and bad, as feeling, as something felt... Blues acknowledges all different kinds of feeling at once."¹⁰⁸ This simultaneity characterized by the blues is perhaps what renders this music so effective in the grieving and healing process. Collins observes, "Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and other classic Black women blues singers offer rich advice to Black women on how to deal with unfaithful and unreliable men."¹⁰⁹ But she also notes that "more recently, Black women's troubles with Black men have generated anger and, from that anger, self-reflection."¹¹⁰ Self-reflection and the wisdom gained from a community of more experienced women act as tools for self-understanding and transformation.

In addition to integrating these classical tools encoded in the blues tradition, Jones's novel includes a number of the structural traits of the blues such as repetition, antiphony, and improvisation. Repetition is conveyed through the urge to transmit the family legend and re-enact the archetypal roles of master and slave in the relationship between modern men and women. (We shall see how antiphony and improvisation play

¹⁰⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 152.

¹⁰⁹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 152.

¹¹⁰ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 152.

out shortly). Indeed, the blues tradition counters the silence that Mama adopts vis-à-vis her relationship to Ursa's father and produces meaning out of Ursa's reluctance to obey both of Tadpole and Mutt's repetitive and insistent demand that she forgets the past (Jones 99).

By re-enacting the traumatic experience of her foremothers, Ursa confronts the slave past. She begins this process with the most recent ancestor and gradually moves toward the more distant ones. When she is initially introduced in the novel, Ursa is involved in a relationship that mimics Mama's past. There are many similarities between the violent mistreatment of Mama by Martin and Ursa by Mutt. Both men believe that their women have a penchant toward sexual immorality because of their seeming fascination with Corregidora. The men deem it necessary that their women condemn the old master's behavior through the deliberate act of forgetting. For Martin and Mutt, remembering the "days of suppressed hysteria" only proves Mama and Ursa inherited, along with the family legend, a tendency toward infidelity, immorality, promiscuity, and sexual perversion.

From the time Ursa was child, she sensed that all three women in her life were keeping some part of her family history hidden from her. As she sits at the piano in one scene, Ursa begins creating an imaginary conversation between herself and her absent husband, Mutt. She tells Mutt: "it was like she had something else behind her eyes. Corregidora was easier than what she wouldn't tell me" (Jones 102). While her mother worked, her grandmother would tell her the Corregidora story. Then she would rock her on her lap on the rocking chair and tell her the story of their lives on Simon's Brazilian plantation. Having the Corregidora stories and memories repeated by all three

women various times throughout the day made it even more obvious that each version of the Corregidora story was fragmented and incomplete. As she meditates on this feeling out loud with Mutt, she seems to realize something important about her mother's life. She notes: "I never saw my mama with a man, never ever saw her with a man" (Jones 101). She also makes another connection between the lack of male presence in her mother's life and the memories of the past that Mama guards as a shameful secret:

My mother's whole body shook with that first birth and memories and she wouldn't make others and she wouldn't give those to me, though she passed the other ones down, the monstrous ones, but she wouldn't give me her won terrible ones. Loneliness. I could feel it like she was breathing it, like it was all in the air. Desire, too. I couldn't recognize it then, but now when I look back that's all I see. Desire and loneliness (Jones 101).

After working through her troubled memories and feeling about Mutt, it becomes clear to Ursa that if she is to understand her own relationships and learn how to better relate to others, she must first gain access to her mother's memories to learn the hidden part of her family story: her parents's relationship. "She feels that [she] couldn't be satisfied until [she] had seen Mama, talked to her, until [she] had discovered her private memory" (Jones 104). Ursa gets on a bus and makes a pilgrimage back to Bracktown, the city where she spent her childhood. Unlike Mama, who lived a life filled with desire and loneliness, Ursa's decision to go speak to her suggests that she is not willing to repeat her mother's past. Once Ursa makes this decision, her keen awareness and her desire to break the cycle of violence imposed by the Corregidora legacy become clear.

It is also clear that Mama is reluctant to share her past with Ursa. She begins by telling how she met Ursa's father, but the plot is laced with the story of a young male slave who Great Gram was forbidden to interact with because he was not white. Ursa

remarks that as Mama tells this story she virtually becomes Great Gram, taking on her voice and the mannerisms she would use when telling a story. Mama finds it difficult to circumvent the experiences of the women who lived difficult lives on a Brazilian plantation. She has learned these stories so well that they have literally obscured and silenced her own life experiences. Mama's silence may have been due to shame or to a desire to spare her daughter from suffering the humiliation that characterizes her relationship with Martin.

Another pattern starts to become clear: oppressive father-daughter relationships may lead to male and female relationships that are entrenched in brutality and pain. Since Grandmama is both Simon Corregidora's daughter and granddaughter, Mama carries the consequences and shame of incest to her relationship with men. Her relationship with Ursa's dad is plagued by violence and dysfunction. Although remembering Martin is painful for Mama, it is obvious that they loved each other and that their love was also accompanied by confusion, shame and hurt. In such a climate, Mama's effort to break the Corregidora curse proves futile.

Like Mama, Ursa feels the absence of both a father and a model of healthy relationships in her life. Therefore, she ends up repeating the only relationship patterns she has learned through the ritualistic telling of the Corregidora legend and the suppressed story of her parents's troubled relationship. Such a negative paternal legacy marks her psyche so deeply that she must resort to a medium that uses the language of the psyche to liberate herself and her relationships. In her ritualistic dialogue between present and past, Ursa must move beyond the level of words spoken and tap into the

unconscious where words unspoken can unfold in a meaningful way. Ursa's personal imperative is a departure from the life Mama lived.

Mama struggles against the weight of family memory and dreads having to yield to Ursa demand that she discloses a more complete version of the family's story. Mama's ritual of telling includes a chapter of their "lived lives" that depicts Ursa's father. Yet the most significant aspect of Mama's version of the family story is that it incorporates the concepts of multilocality and multivocality. Mama cannot help but recount the family's experiences in Brazil before reaching the part of the story with which Ursa is least familiar. The virtual transformation that Ursa witnesses as her mother speaks is astounding and surreal: "Mama kept talking until it wasn't her that was talking, but Great Gram. I stared at her because she wasn't Mama now, she was Great Gram talking" (Jones 124). Mama not only echoes multiple voices (that of her foremothers) in her storytelling, but is actually transformed into them. Multi-vocality, trans-locality and trans-temporality are all encoded in the way Mama chooses to narrate the family story: she integrates the voices of Brazilian slaves on a late-nineteenth-century plantation. Readers can almost hear the ghostly resonances in Mama's voice, which permeate her storytelling.

Ursa admires her mother's courage in being the first to step outside of the Corregidora tradition and establish a relationship with an African American man. This chapter in the family history represents a new direction. Yet, Mama does not rejoice at attempting to break the shackles of memory, but instead allows her failed relationship with Ursa's father to overshadow her personal voice. It is as if Mama has no voice of her own. Ursa observes "it was as if their memory, the memory of all the Corregidora

women, was her memory too, as strong with her as her own private memory, or almost as strong” (Jones 129). Mama uses the Corregidora story much as a widow’s veil hides sorrow; she is ashamed to share her own experiences with her daughter. Humiliation causes Mama to relinquish her own private memories to those of the Corregidora legend, and consequently this forestalls any possibility of Ursa fully knowing her father’s story. Literally and figuratively, Ursa’s fatherlessness is created by family secrets and suppressed memories.

By coming to terms with her own place in the Corregidora clan and its heritage Ursa creates her own path to moving beyond a captivating legacy. She makes their collective captivity patent when she laments that Mama would never repeat her own memories. For some reason “Corregidora was easier than what she wouldn’t tell me” (Jones 102). As long as Ursa feels that part of the family history is being obscured, she can never feel a sense of complete ownership of her family past. This is an important rite that she must experience because “only where man feels himself to be heir and successor to the past has he the strength for a new beginning.”¹¹¹ She lays claim to her family’s past by singing the blues.

Through the process of delving deeper into the past, Ursa taps into the music source, Grandmama’s love of the blues. Ursa repeats the role of “concubine-daughter” through a conflation of the father/husband roles, but that difficult experience is countered by the fact that she, like Grandmama, finds in music a vehicle for performing grief as well as a source of solace. Antiphony, the call and response practice in diasporic African storytelling, is echoed in Ursa’s declaration: “They squeezed

¹¹¹ Jahn, *Muntu*, 18.

Corregidora into me, and I sung back in return” (Jones 103). Ursa’s response to the legacy forced upon her is a liberatory response. Singing back for Ursa signifies and highlights the necessary act of returning to Bracktown to recover Mama’s memory. This is how Ursa liberates herself from nightmarish memories of the distant and more recent past.

For Ursa, singing is a ritualistic act that bridges past, present, and future. In this ritualistic interaction with the past, Ursa finds that she can father herself. *She* can mediate between self and community. Sensing the threat of total re-enslavement by the conscious acceptance of Great Gram’s repressive rituals, Ursa, unlike Grandmama and Mama, opts for the improvisation of her own ritual, her own fathering, and consequently, her own healing. The healing of self requires that she mend the breach between self and community that was transmitted to her since her maternal ancestors were brought from Africa. To accomplish this, Ursa uses all the psychic tools at her disposal: dreaming, composing blues lyrics, playing the piano, and singing. These are the media through which the self can enter into communion with others.

The devices also give Ursa access to the collective unconscious. Tapping into this store of eternal knowledge brings comfort and a deeper understanding of self in relation to the community. In this way, Ursa’s desire to be free from burdens of the past through the use of such psychic instruments such as art is, in many ways, reminiscent of Nadine from *The Dew Breaker*, who found some peace in painting a portrait of her aborted baby. Nadine finds healing not in a ritual connected to Haitian culture, but in a Japanese ritual of creating water altars to commemorate the death of young children. Just as Ursa abandons the ritualized telling of Corregidora’s story for an improvisation

of a newer family story, Nadine uses her artistic talents to deal with the guilt, shame and isolation that comes with having aborted her baby. Both Nadine and Ursa use their art to grieve and heal from traumatic memories. Art is as much a vehicle for healing, as it is a means of connecting to spirituality and freedom. This can be understood when taking into account the social history of the blues.

As a genre, the blues has long been rooted in African spirituality and closely connected with the newly acquired freedom of the enslaved.¹¹² Not surprisingly, blues language and tradition are linked to Ursa's cathartic and liberating journey toward self-understanding and self-determination. Through an artistic vision stemming from communal and folk traditions, she finds and adds her authentic, personal voice to the family story. Personal history uses the materials of folk songs to re-create family history and bring about a change of direction in the lives of the Corregidora women. In this way, Ursa takes ownership of her life, her past, and her destiny through the act of singing songs. In August Wilson's 1984 play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, a similar sense of ownership and self-determination is displayed in Bynum's life once he too, like Ursa, learns the sacred obligation of finding one's life song. When a mystical figure appears to Bynum, he identifies this figure as his "daddy." Bynum's daddy expresses his dismay that Bynum has been "carrying other people's songs and [does] not [have] one of [his] own."¹¹³ At this point in the play this mystical father teaches Bynum how

¹¹² Alfonso W. Hawkins, *The Jazz Trope* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2008), xviii.

¹¹³ August Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone: A Play in Two Acts* (New York: New American Library, 1988), 9-10.

to find his song and in so doing, enables Bynum to bind people together, in other words Bynum is able to “work the song’s full power in the world.”¹¹⁴

Song becomes tantamount to resistance and liberation from repressive and oppressive forces experienced by African diasporic peoples, and it can be viewed as an essential feature of transformative rituals. Existentialist approaches to the study of ritual tend to see rituals as part of a search for meaning and direction. Therefore, being human necessarily involves creating projects and purposes, living toward the future, and forming a self through actions.¹¹⁵ Singing allows Ursa to sift through her family history. She relives and retells the plight of women who have suffered traumatic experiences through the songs she improvises. Ursa’s improvisations often provide clarity of vision. For instance, she may start a song by addressing one set of troubling issues, but ends with a reflection on a seemingly unrelated topic. Ursa attempts to justify her objective as a blues artist to her mother who, at one moment, calls the blues “devil’s music.” She sings:

Yes, if you understood me, Mama, you’d see I was trying to explain it, in the blues, without words, the explanation somewhere behind the words. To explain what will always be there. Soot crying out of my eyes.’ O Mister who come to my house You do not come to visit You do not come to see me to visit You come to hear me sing with my thighs You come to see me open my door and sing with my thighs Perhaps you watch me when I am sleeping I don’t know if you watch me when I am sleeping. Who are you? I am the daughter of the daughter of the daughter of Ursa of currents, steel wool and electric wire for hair (Jones 66-67).

But by the time she ends her musical piece, Ursa has addressed a variety of listeners, not just Mama. She explains her mission to Mama, tells the experience of being a woman singing with her body, and concludes with a declaration of self. Thus, Ursa

¹¹⁴ Wilson, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, 10.

¹¹⁵ Schilbrack, *Thinking through Rituals*, 6.

illustrates that music, communal memory, and self-definition are all intimately connected. What Ursa's songs ultimately lead the readers of *Corregidora* to understand is that, as an individual, Ursa is involved in an enterprise reflecting Afro-diasporic history's multivocality and multilocality. Ursa sings the plight of various peoples facing various forms of oppression in the contemporary contexts of racism and sexism and in the more remote context of African slavery in the Americas. Like Great Gram before her, Ursa contextualizes her own experiences by superimposing them onto those of her Afro-diasporic kin. Ursa's musical meditations are inscribed with timeless, communal suffering as she collapses the communal and the personal as well as the present and the past into a single voice. She becomes the vessel that carries the stories and songs of her ancestors, Mutt, Tadpole, and the women she meets along her journey to self-possession: Catherine Lawson, Jeffy, and Sal Cooper. Her hybrid voice testifies to the enduring pain that aches long after the moment of cruelty has passed.

As a daughter artist, Ursa uses her abilities to turn an oppressive paternal legacy into a revelatory, didactic story and into meditative lyrics. When she sits at the piano or dreams, Jones distinguishes for the readers Ursa's somber thoughts, moods, her state of confusion, and her nightmarish memories of her accident by using italics. This is also how she grafts Ursa's present experiences to those she learns from her foremothers's ritualistic telling of various episodes of the *Corregidora* legacy. Ursa takes the insight and wisdom provided through the music she creates and uses them to improvise a new life and new relationships to her closest kin: Mama and Mutt (Jones 148). Ursa's own brand of the blues includes improvisation, repetition, multivocality, mimicking of archetypal relationships and enduring tales.

Adopting some aspect of other people's experiences is Ursa's way of entering into a ritualized and healing relationship with her family and her community. This objective is at the heart of her artistic life: "*I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life and theirs*" (Jones 59). As the plot of Jones's novel progresses, Ursa gradually recedes deeper into her family's past, allowing inherited memories to speak through her. As a storyteller, Ursa repeatedly shares fragments of the Corregidora story with her husbands and allows them to join her in the ritualized act of remembering her family's heritage. Both Mutt and Tadpole usually become annoyed with her compulsion to deal with every situation by voicing a part of the Corregidora story. The story often triggers a negative reaction from them that leads Ursa to question her identity and whether she is truly living a life that is hers and hers alone. Slowly, Ursa starts to realize that only by taking an active part and becoming a protagonist in the Corregidora story she can find her own voice. She discovers her individuality through the performance of communal memory. The re-enactment of archetypal roles as a path to better self-understanding is extremely risky. It taints Ursa's present with a sense of alienation, the inability to love deeply and passionately, and the fear of her sexuality.

Like her grandmother, Ursa often feels that Corregidora's memory is luring her into accepting and affirming that she too is one of "Corregidora's women." In one of her imaginary conversations with Simon, Ursa vehemently denies this, stating bluntly: "I never was one of your women" (Jones 77). She militantly declares her identity, linking it to her family history and acknowledging how her music distinguishes her from her foremothers: "I am Ursa Corregidora. I have tears for eyes. I was made to touch my past at an early age... Let no one pollute my music. I will dig out their

temples. I will pluck out their eyes” (Jones 77). In order to heal from and move beyond this traumatic legacy, Ursa knows she must first reclaim the autonomy of her psychic space and liberate her self from her family’s haunting past. She cannot afford, like her grandmother, to become Simon’s concubine-daughter. She must instead confront the family by solving a piece of the Corregidora story that has remained much like a family riddle. She seems to ask: “who is my father?” Ursa believes that solving this mystery will help her heal her relationship with Mutt. She asks, “What is it that a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he want to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can’t get her out of his mind the next” (Jones 184)? To solve this enigma, Ursa must return to the home of her childhood and interact with the space where her foremothers live. This return is a momentous turn in Ursa’s personal journey to self-understanding.

By returning to her childhood home to demand that her mother shares the conspicuously absent chapters of her family genealogy, Ursa is transformed. It is only after her conversation with Mama that she is able to piece together fragments to view them as a more cohesive picture. Satisfied with the connections she discovers among the lived life (Mama’s life), the written word (Great Gram and Grandmama’s lives), and the life that needs to be sung (her own) Ursa wonders, “What’s a life always spoken and only spoken” (Jones 102)? She finds a renewed sense of purpose when realizes she can contribute a distinct chapter to the family legacy by reconfiguring its essence through the gift of song. The blues, then, liberate all four generations from the pages of hysteria. With song comes healing that extends to all of the Corregidora women: “I *wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life and theirs*” (Jones 59).

Music and memory intersect in the attempt to re-integrate the “self” back into the community. Through her art, Ursa wants to feel, love, and create a connection with her kin. That music is her medium of choice is not surprising. This hearkens back to Jones’s enterprise of “liberating voices” in privileging the oral elements of African American folk culture. Ursa’s earliest memories are connected to the fact that the women in her life experienced their individual worlds musically and rhythmically. Great Gram had her rocking chair and stories of Simon, Grandmama had her old blues record, and Mama had her Christian music. Ursa reminisces and realizes that all three of her female ancestors’s lives were shaped by modes of rhythmic sound. In reflecting back on the intimate community her foremothers created, Ursa asks, “What was their life then? Only a life spoken to the sounds of my breathing or a low-playing Victrola...”(Jones 103). For Ursa, commemorating her ancestry requires a re-enactment and mimicking of the archetypal master-slave relationship in combination with a rhythmic rendition. Archetypes (which, for Jung, are permanent, eternal patterns of understanding)¹¹⁶ and music grant access to the collective unconscious. The blues also display these patterns that lead to understanding and self-knowledge.

By combining the tools available to her, Ursa, unlike her mother, succeeds in becoming an heir to the past, not a damaged relic of it. Thus, she summons the strength to create a new beginning. The blues, rejected by Mama and Mutt, proves Ursa’s source of liberation and salvation. The understanding Ursa gains through these two ritualistic acts is made patent when at the end of the novel she solves the family riddle:

In a split second of love and hate I knew what it was... I held his ankles it was like I didn’t know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram

¹¹⁶ Coupe, *Myth*, 131.

and Corregidora—like Mama when she had started talking like Great Gram. But was what Corregidora had done to her, to them, any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other, than what Mama had done to Daddy, or what he had done to her in return, making her walk down the street looking like a whore (Jones 184)?

Unlike Mama and Martin, Ursa has the chance to redeem her relationship with the man she loves. She does not have to allow herself to be so overcome by shame that she removes herself from her community. In this context, music becomes the tool of communal reintegration.

As a blues singer, composer, and piano player, Ursa finds she can establish a connection with her audience. It is subconscious, but working on such a level makes sense. The messages transmitted to Ursa from her great grandmother have been ingrained in her psyche through repetition. As in the blues, repetition has a powerful effect, because each repeated thought is not exactly the same as the previous idea. Each repeated line is coded with new information that makes it unique, even as a superficial listen makes it sound just the same. As repetition in the blues connects African Americans, and the repetition of the Corregidora story creates a sense of kinship among four generations of women, Ursa's artistic talent bridges the intimate to the communal. When fathers are unavailable to serve as bridge to the community, daughters can seek artistic and other creative means of entering into relationship with family lore or local legends. It is through these mediums that archetypal relationships produce and transmit communal knowledge and self-awareness.

Music becomes Ursa's path to establishing an umbilical connection with the greater community, displaying the communal self, and tapping into the collective

unconscious that “is inherited not acquired.”¹¹⁷ Compulsive retelling the story of Simon Corregidora transforms it into family lore. On the piano’s keys, Ursa, in turn, is able to transform her family’s traumatic story from personal to universal. Like in other palimpsest narratives, *Corregidora* blurs the lines between desire and abuse and between fascination and fear—transcending the local and reaching the universal.

The final segment of *Corregidora* transcends the personal by centering on kinship and community. At this moment in the novel Ursa is a musician at the Spider. She is weaving web-like connections between past and present. This part of the novel harkens back to an earlier moment when Ursa first meets Sal, another employee at the Spider. Sal talks about feeling a sense of connection to Ursa that she finds hard to explain: “You know ever since I first laid eyes on you I thought you was one of my long-lost relatives... I just kept feeling that you kin to me. You know I’m a spiritualist. I believe in things like that” (Jones 70). Sal clearly feels a sense of connection to Ursa that transcends blood ties. Ursa, on the other hand, neither feels a deep connection to Sal nor to anyone else. By the end of the novel, however, Ursa has warmed up to the people who populate the familiar space of the Spider café.

Sitting at the piano, Ursa is transformed into a powerful singer, singing unspeakable feelings and establishing emotional bonds with her listeners. She soothes those in the audience who are nursing anxieties and uncertainty about the future. This is a moment that reminds readers of the psychic and healing ability that traditional blues singers have often had over their audience. Like “root workers” (Voodoo/hoodoo spiritual doctors who heal with herbs), blues singers have a way of taking pain and

¹¹⁷ Coupe, *Myth*, 131.

sorrow and transforming them into comfort, encouragement, and healing for themselves and their listeners. In fact, in her conclusion to *Liberating Voices*, Jones argues in favor of the critical role of music in the communal experience of healing and transcendence. She quotes the black female playwright Ntozake Shange when she writes, “In African American artistic endeavor, black musicians may still be the vanguard. Musicians use ‘collection(s) of sounds to communicate to one another... things that language cannot adequately convey... feelings and realities’ they can more easily ‘create possibilities’ and transcend controversies over definitions of African American reality and character in the New World” (Jones 190). Although Jones focuses on the function of rhythm among musicians, one could apply these ideas to a variety of African American artistic rituals. Neo-African sculpture, music, dance, and storytelling are powerful ways of communicating *the unspeakable*, bridging bonds of kinship, and creating possibilities after the forced migration of African peoples to the New World.

The fact that *Corregidora* focuses on the legacy of slavery opens up the space for a reflection on the Middle Passage as a key moment in the history of the African diaspora. The Middle Passage is marked by the loss of kinship and violence, and, as illustrated in *Corregidora*, the plantation experience perpetuated these two elements and complicated the potential for holistic fathering and father-daughter relationships. Through artistic rituals, daughters have worked to understand this collective history and rebuild healthier bonds of support and kinship. *Corregidora* illustrates how contemporary women in African diasporic communities have used artistic rituals to engage with the past while discovering transformational alternatives for living more balanced lives.

In their quest for the communal self, daughters encounter problematic fathers, traumatic family legacies, and the challenging question of how to proceed toward a future that is self-determined, but communally integrated. It is through ritualized art creation, an engagement with a known past, and a deliberate reconnection with ancestral roots and memory that they ultimately create a more holistic communal self that acknowledges and honors multivocality and multilocality—as Ursa’s voice and voyages reveal. Ursa finds that she must return to the space she has come to consider as her ancestral home, in order to recuperate missing pieces of her paternal history. A more complete version of this tale empowers her to name and articulate for herself who she is. This is made possible through her multiple crossings of urban and rural spaces as well as a journey of return to her childhood home.

CHAPTER 3

Configuring an Ecological Self through Northeastern Brazilian Myth and Paternal Memory

The idea of return voyages has informed the discussion of father-daughter relationships in Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* and in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*. In Marilene Felinto's *The Women of Tijuapapo*, the voyage is also vital to the transformation of the daughter-protagonist. A return to Northeast Brazil, the land of origin for Felinto's Rísia, allows for closure with a difficult childhood while also emphasizing the power of place on the shaping of memory. The novel narrates Rísia's participation in a type of meditation-in-motion. Her journey reminds Felinto's readers that returns, virtual or literal, can revolutionize a person's subjectivity. Rísia's pilgrimage to her ancestral land inspires the creation of art that helps her feel justified in hoping for and dreaming about a "happy ending" like those seen in "big screen movie[s] in another language" (Felinto 120). As Michael Hanchard suggests, it is this desire to imagine alternatives and the striving to actualize them that constitutes the diasporic identities experienced by Rísia and the other Afro-diasporic daughter-protagonists featured in this dissertation.¹¹⁸

Although outside of Africa, Brazil has the largest population of peoples of African descent, Brazilian ancestry also includes a fusion of Europeans, Indigenous, and

¹¹⁸ See Michael Hanchard, "Racial Consciousness and Afro-Diasporic Experiences: Antonio Gramsci Reconsidered," *Socialism and Democracy* 3 (Fall 1991), 83-106.

Asian peoples. Like many Brazilians, Rísia’s ancestry is a reflection of this hybrid cultural origin. Rísia explains how her maternal grandmother, a woman of African descent, was forced by socio-economic circumstances to give her mother away for adoption. Although Rísia does not explicitly identify herself as “Black” because of her multi-racial ancestry, she is part of the African diaspora. Felinto is also reluctant to identify herself unabashedly as “Black.” This is understandable, since, as Boyce-Davies posits, the term “Black” is both a “color-coded and politically-based term of marking and definition.” “Black” is a term that is rooted in a vision that is Pan-Africanist and Afro-diasporic. Felinto does not align herself or her work with a Pan-Africanist agenda, but rather with her regional and indigenous roots. Yet given her Indigenous and African ancestry she is, what one would term in the United States, a “woman of color.” In his comparative analysis of racial patterns in the United States and Brazil, Carl Degler remarks that Brazil, unlike the United States, has not traditionally had a sharply polarized and racially defined culture. He writes:

There are only two qualities in the United States racial pattern: white and black. A person is one or the other; there is no intermediate position...In Brazil, for example a Negro is a person of African descent who has no white ancestry at all. If a person has some indefinite amount of white as well as Negro ancestry he is something else. He is not white, to be sure, though he may be a *mulato*, or a *moreno*, or a *pardo*...Brazilians are not color-blind. Indeed they see, socially, more color distinctions than North Americans, who can see only two: white and black.¹¹⁹

Edward Telles’s analysis of data from Brazil’s 1980 census supports the idea that racial boundaries and “intermediate position[s]” play a fundamental role in Brazilian race relations. He explains that, “the boundary line between white and brown, for example,

¹¹⁹ Carl N. Degler, *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States*. (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 101-106.

is often blurred; there is a tendency to identify as white persons near the white-brown color boundary.”¹²⁰ In Brazil, racial categories are determined less by racial ancestry and more by key markers such as phenotype (skin complexion, lips, hair), social class, regional origin, and a myriad of other elements.¹²¹

Like Telles, in my scholarship, I refer to blacks and browns collectively as Afro-Brazilians, even though these individuals may be of Indian or primarily Indian ancestry or identity. Rísia shares memories in which she describes her physical appearance and implicitly points to her racialized experiences as person of African and Indigenous ancestry. For example, Rísia marks herself as an Afro-Brazilian and a daughter of the African diaspora when she describes the texture of her hair and her grooming experiences in a manner that would resonate with many people of African descent. She explains, “my hair looked like a hangman’s rope kneaded with the brilliantine mama put on it and that the sun melted at midday. My hair wasn’t smooth like Libânia’s or Maisa’s. I had coarse hair” (Felinto 59). Rísia describes a racialized identity by establishing a phenotypic comparison between the texture of her hair and that of her classmates.

Although Brazil has traditionally prided itself on the cultivation of racial harmony, there is still a social hierarchy based on race. Those that appear more European are regarded as socially superior, enjoy more social privileges, have better access to education, and live in exclusive neighborhoods. Rísia is marginalized and

¹²⁰ Edward E. Telles, “Ethnic Boundaries and Political Mobilization among African Brazilians: Comparison with the U.S. Case,” in *Racial Politics in Contemporary Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 84.

¹²¹ See Degler’s *Neither Black nor White*, page 102 and Telles’s “Ethnic Boundaries and Political Mobilization among African Brazilians,” pages 84-89.

“othered,” due to both her dark skin and her relative poverty.¹²² Because Rísia is from the Northeast, she is stereotyped and regarded as an inferior person by those living in the ultra urban city of São Paulo. Rísia’s desire to escape the dire social circumstances associated with life in the Northeast motivates her to reimagine her identity and create a fictional world in which she is not wretched, but glorified.

In this chapter, I deliberately contextualize and analyze Felinto’s novel within a translocal and diasporic framework due to my desire to reconnect Afro-diasporic writing by women, dis-located by space and time. This yearning to bring together the voices of women writers and artists across the African diaspora has been articulated in the work of Gayl Jones, in that of Toni Morrison, (specifically in her concept of “re-memory”), and the writings of Ana Maurine Lara.¹²³ These women writers and artists defy the boundaries of language, history, place, time, and restricted consciousness in order to reconnect, heal, and name gaps and absences. For Carole Boyce-Davies, “because we were/are products of separations and dislocations and dis-memberings, people of African descent in the Americas historically have sought reconnections.”¹²⁴ Boyce-Davies invokes the story of the flying Africans who sought to return to Africa, the “Back to Africa” movements of Marcus Garvey, those before him, as well as the Pan-Africanist activism of W.E.B. Dubois and C.L.R. James in order to historically contextualize the yearning for reconnection that has long existed in the African diaspora.

¹²² See Degler’s *Neither Black Nor White* (page 105) for insights on how class shapes color/racial categorization.

¹²³ See Jones’s *Corregidora*, Morrison’s *Beloved*, and Lara’s *Erzulie’s Skirt* (Washington, DC: Red Bone Press, 2006).

¹²⁴ Boyce-Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, 17.

In *The Women of Tijucopapo*, I read and interpret Rísia's story and her circumstances along side other daughter-protagonists of African descent. In her exploration of race and gender in Felinto's novel, Cristina Sáenz de Tejada interprets Rísia's cultural heritage as a source of something with which readers of any nationality could identify. Sáenz de Tejada suggests that Rísia finds in her racial origins "hope of liberty and recognition as an Afro-Brazilian."¹²⁵ The desire to be acknowledged and to be free is cherished by most citizens around the world. In proposing a contrasting point of view to Sáenz de Tejada's reading of Rísia's family background, Paula Jordão argues that Rísia's rejection of her mother "is not only associated with emotional abandonment but with a refusal of her ethnic origins."¹²⁶ Sáenz de Tejada's and Jordão's diverging perspectives illustrate the complexities of interpreting discourses linked to racial origins in a range of Brazilian contexts. Rísia's "refusal of ethnic origins" could be interpreted as the internalization of negative stereotypes often associated with African Brazilian or Indigenous Brazilian heritage. Given that each slot within the Brazilian racial continuum is associated with a set of socio-economic inequalities or opportunities, Rísia's poverty-stricken childhood is racialized. The intersection of race, class, and gender inequalities represented in story of this daughter-protagonist influenced my decision to examine Felinto's work from an Afro-diasporic perspective and in parallel with the writings of other multi-racial authors of African descent.

As discussed in previous chapters, the positive portrayals of father figures in fiction by Afro-diasporic women writers usually represent the bridge between hearth

¹²⁵ Cristina Sáenz de Tejada, "Representaciones de la negritude brasileña en *Mulher no Espelho* y *As Mulheres de Tijucopapo*," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 16 (1997), 45-52.

¹²⁶ Paula Jordão, "From Diaspora to Nomadic Identity in the work of Lispector and Felinto," *Comparative Literature and Culture* 11(3) (September 2009).

and community. In this context, fathers compel their daughters to follow paths that embrace the use of the imagination and the exploration of unknown realms. Paternal presence as storyteller and communal link manifests itself memorably in *The Women of Tijucopapo*. This book was originally published in 1982 in Portuguese with the title *As Mulheres de Tijucopapo*.¹²⁷ It tells the story of a daughter whose father inducts her into various worlds beyond the familiar sphere through storytelling. As storytellers, fathers are influential figures and lend their support in the formation of their daughters's subjectivities.

The Women of Tijucopapo is narrated in the first person. The novel is structured much like an epistolary monologue in which the protagonist, Rísia, addresses those she believes have deserted her: her parents, her boyfriend, Jonas, her dearest friend Nema, and perhaps even the world. The constant zig-zagging and switching of Rísia's addressees at any given moments in the novel complements Felinto's disjointed writing style. This stylistic move on Felinto's part contributes to the stream-of-consciousness feel of the novel, while it also can be viewed as magnet/anchor to pull in her readers as surrogates for Rísia's family and friends. By alternating to whom the narrator-protagonist directs her interior monologues, Felinto underscores the psychological and emotional dimensions of Rísia's mythic and imaginative pilgrimage.

Like Danticat and Jones, Felinto views the family as a site where artistic imagination forges alternatives for daughters out of difficult paternal interactions and legacies. My analysis of *The Women of Tijucopapo* sheds light on how local myths and specific ecosystems shape the perspectives daughters have about themselves, their

¹²⁷ Marilene Felinto, *The Women of Tijucopapo*, trans. Irene Matthews (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

fathers, and their vernacular cultures. Unlike with Gayl Jones, there are several correlations that exist between Felinto's art (the novel) and creator (author's biography).

Born in 1957 in Recife, Marilene Felinto lived out her childhood in the provincial Northeast of Brazil, but grew up in the industrial city of São Paulo, after her family moved when she was twelve years old. Like the protagonist of *The Women of Tijucopapo*, Felinto grew up listening to the stories her father and grandmother told and, in turn, inventing new stories for her siblings. She was an outstanding student and later attended the University of São Paulo, where she earned a degree in Portuguese and English literature in 1981.

Marilene Felinto's work often includes themes of fragmentation, anger, pain, desertion and how these ideas and sentiments are connected to the construction of post-modern female subjectivities. Many of the issues she addresses in her fiction are inspired by experiences from her own life and from traditions associated with her childhood in Pernambuco, a state located in the Northeast of Brazil.

Felinto pays homage to the regionalist literary tradition of the 1930s in her essay, "Outros heróis e esse Graciliano," a biographical essay about one of Brazil's most celebrated regionalists writer, Graciliano Ramos.¹²⁸ Between 1937 and 1938, Ramos wrote *Vidas secas/Barren Lives*. Ramos's iconographic text depicts the odyssey of a peasant family of four wandering the backlands in hopes of overcoming their grim prospects of survival in the most rustic and severely arid landscapes of Brazil. In this compendary novel Ramos uses vivid imagery to share with readers the climactic violence and socio-economic injustices that Brazilians of the Northeast experienced.

¹²⁸ Felinto cites Graciliano Ramos and Raquel de Queiroz among her favorite regionalist writers.

People in the region have often suffered through periods of severe draught, which kill cattle and make agriculture virtually impossible. By the same token, they have often dealt with intense periods of torrential rains and destructive floods. The ecological violence is only exacerbated by the cruelty that peasants often suffer at the hands of the law and the complex structure of power, represented by the figure of the ruthless *coronel*.¹²⁹ During the first three decades of the twentieth century the backlands were abandoned to autocratic political leaders, their private armies, and bandits. Regionalist writers of the 1930s drew from these realities to produce some of the most memorable Brazilian fiction of the twentieth century.

Felinto revisits this literary tradition while also commemorating Ramos's legacy with the publication of "Outros heróis," and anchors herself more firmly within a tradition of writers who use their craft to represent peoples of the Northeast and the harsh conditions that shape realities and their traditions. Her dedication to keeping this tradition visible within contemporary literature is at the heart of Felinto's agenda as a writer. The artistic traditions and folklore of the Northeast are integral to most aspects of Brazilian life.

In her 1991 collection of eleven short stories, *Postcard*, Felinto revisits her Northeastern roots and picks up on some of the autobiographical themes she explores in *The Women of Tijucopapo*.¹³⁰ "Visão da Bagaceira," the second story in the sequence, is particularly illustrative of Felinto's role as mediator of the distinct lives that Brazilians experience in the Southeastern, megalopolis of São Paulo and the

¹²⁹ Patriarchal leaders or sometimes they can be representatives of the State in provincial and remote territories of Brazil.

¹³⁰ Marilene Felinto, *Outros heróis e esse Graciliano* (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1983) and *Postcard* (São Paulo: Iluminuras, 1991).

Pernambucan *sertão*/backlands in Northeast Brazil. Having herself experienced life as a rural migrant living in São Paulo, Felinto narrates stories that conjure a collective social experience of Northeastern Brazilians: the exodus of Northeastern migrants traveling toward the southern promised lands in order to escape the dreadful cycles of drought and rain as well as the resulting conditions of misery and poverty. Felinto has faced the harshest criticism for expressing controversial views on the Brazilian socioeconomic elites and how this segment of the population has often contributed to a history of exploitation and exclusion. In her analysis of Felinto's short stories in *Postcard*, Marguerite Itamar Harrison aptly remarks on Felinto's symbolic depiction of the historical tension between the Brazilian Northeast (where Felinto spent her childhood) and the politically and industrially hegemonic South (the place where she came into adulthood).¹³¹

Like *The Women of Tijucopapo*, the novel *O lago encantado de Grongonzo* /*The Enchanted Lake of Grongonzo*, fuses Brazilian lore with personal memories.¹³² The story describes a woman who revisits her past. She does this while waiting at Grongonzo for her friends to arrive.¹³³ For Deisi, the protagonist of this tale, Grongonzo is a place with the capacity to shape, shelter, and embrace the individual. In this story, Felinto features yet another version of a theme that continuously resurfaces in

¹³¹ Marguerite Itamar Harrison, "Through the Eyes of Brazil's African Daughters: Vision and Memory in the Artwork of Rosana Paulino and in the Short Fiction of Marilene Felinto" *Lusotopie*, 12 (1) (April 2005), 125-136.

¹³² Marilene Felinto, *O lago encantado de Grongonzo* (São Paulo: Editora Guanabara, 1987). The title of this text can be loosely translated as *The Enchanted Lake of Grongonzo*.

¹³³ An important feature of this novel is the invocation of various myths associated with the enchanted lake of Grongonzo. In Felinto's novel, the lake is described as having the power to turn women into stone. In other folktales, Grongonzo Lake has the power to appear and disappear. As the legend goes, only a few people have actually seen this lake, and those who have had the privilege to experience this mystical sight can only do so once in their lifetime. The legend also mentions the existence of treasures hidden at the bottom of the lake.

her work: the limitless power of childhood imagination and perspective. There is something almost mystical and reverent in the way the Pernambucan author values, dramatizes, and interprets childhood reminiscences.

The autobiographical elements and the concern with internal and external landscapes that prevail in Felinto's *The Women of Tijucopapo* are found throughout her body of writing. Raised in one of the poorest states in Brazil, Pernambuco, by a family of mixed raced heritage, Felinto's fiction is deeply conscious of how female subjectivities are fashioned by the legacies connected to race, places, and particular social spaces. Felinto's writing thrums with the most significant perspectives found in the fiction of women writers from politically marginalized communities. In the afterword to her English translation of the novel, Irene Matthew's explains how Felinto's short novel draws from and nests with the literary traditions of African American and Native American women like Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Alice Walker. Felinto's connection to these globally recognized writers is premised on the thematic concerns and the social agenda found in her work. Like the writers mentioned above, Felinto is interested in the ways collective histories shape personal and familial memories and legacies, along with the mythic dimensions of local and folk traditions. In an analysis of *The Women of Tijucopapo*, Sara E. Cooper explains that Felinto's connection to these writers can be attributed to "her fragmentary and mythic writing style, rich in culturally charged symbolism... [as well as its] emphasis on the psychological and emotional."¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Sara E. Cooper, "Forging a Family Discourse in Marilene Felinto's *The Women of Tijucopapo*: Or, Unraveling the Intricacies of Miscommunication," in *Reading the Family Dance* by John V. Knapp and Kenneth Womack (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003).

Understanding the social context from which *The Women of Tijucoapapo* emerges is vital to grasping Felinto's agenda as a socially engaged writer. Spending the early years of her childhood in the Northeast means that Marilene Felinto was precociously aware of the socio-economic injustices and inequalities that existed within her community. Her family's migration to São Paulo as she reached early adulthood served only to highlight just how desperate life can be for those living in the Northeast. It is also in the city that children of migrant workers come to fully understand how seemingly limitless opportunities may remain out of their reach. While like some of her regionalist literary precursors of the 1930s, Felinto emphasizes the physical, linguistic, and emotional deprivations associated with living and growing up in the Brazilian backlands, it is her depiction of the effects of migration on the young female psyche that places her work among the writings of such contemporary Brazilian women writers as Clarice Lispector.¹³⁵

If Felinto's socio-political concerns remained subtle to her readers before the publication of *Jornalisticamente incorreto* (2000), there was a shift in such a perspective after the introduction of this collection of articles initially published in her newspaper column with the *Folha de São Paulo*, between 1997 and 1999.¹³⁶ The title of the text reflects the author's tendency to be non-conformist and her refusal to follow even the most mundane conventions such as those mandated by mainstream writer's manuals. In these journalistic pieces Felinto also displays her radical leftist and feminist perspective through her critical and brutally honest reflections on themes

¹³⁵ I refer here to Lispector's portrayal of the young female immigrant, Macabéa, in her 1977 novel, *A hora da estrela* (*The Hour of the Star*).

¹³⁶ Marilene Felinto, *Jornalisticamente incorreto* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Editora Record, 2000).

ranging from national cuisine, sports, and smuggling to social inequities, religion, and the press. Since 2002, Felinto has continued expressing her political and social views through her contribution to the left-leaning monthly magazine, *Caros Amigos*.

Jornalisticamente as well as the articles published in *Caros Amigos* further highlight Felinto's dedication to using her voice to spur conversations about controversial and sometimes uncomfortable social issues.

Her latest work of fiction, *Obsceno abandono: amor e perda* was published in 2002.¹³⁷ In this novel, Felinto explores the precise depth and dimensions of anguish, loss, and the conflation of pain and the eroticism. The author's focus on how suffering shapes a person's perspective is clearly revealed when at one point in the novel a doctor asks the female protagonist if she would like to be administered some anesthesia to dull her pain. She responds, "*anestesia, não. Eu vim aqui pra sentir dor física mesmo*" / "anesthesia, no thanks. I came here precisely because I want to experience physical pain."¹³⁸ In such moments the woman appears to confess her acceptance of the existentialist belief that through suffering a person can apprehend reality and overcome, the sometimes, numbing effects contemporary life.

Initially published in Portuguese, *The Women of Tijucoapapo* illustrates how ritualistic art promotes the reclamation of Brazilian Northeastern folk traditions, makes possible a personal pilgrimage, and facilitates the reconfiguration of family legacy. The heroine is the artist Rísia, a woman traveling symbolically back toward the land of her childhood and, most importantly, toward the land of her legendary foremothers. The

¹³⁷ Marilene Felinto, *Obsceno abandono: amor e perda* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Editora Record, 2002). This title can be loosely translated in English as *Obscene Abandon: Love and Loss*.

¹³⁸ Felinto, *Obsceno abandono*, 58.

reclamation of her roots is made possible by Rísia's artistry. Rísia weaves a story of origins as she travels, and in this way re-enacts two experiences that are hallmarks of the *cordel* poetic and nomadic experience.

In her study of cordel literature, *Stories on a String* (1982), Candace Slater presents a few of the meanings conveyed by the word "string." One of the most significant ideas she discusses is that "string" evokes the " 'stringing together' of bits and pieces of dissimilar material that results in a *folheto*/pamphlet literature" (a more native Brazilian designation for cordel literature). This folk genre is also known more colloquially as *folhetes*. The barely literate authors of pamphlet literature continue to reintegrate into their craft themes that dates back to a European tradition that began long before Cabral first laid eyes on the territory that would become Brazil in 1500. Yet, as Slater remarks, cordel literature has a uniquely Brazilian history:

"For almost a century, these stories have been the principal reading matter of the lower classes in the Brazilian Northeast, spanning at least seven states, and containing approximately a third of the country's 120 million people. They provide a document of actual historical events, and even more, of people's often ambivalent attitudes toward the forces shaping their lives."¹³⁹

Thematically speaking, folhetos draw from a range of subject areas. Some cordel literature treat current events (such as the Twin Towers debacle of 2001),¹⁴⁰ others narrate the exploits and adventures of famous bandits, and still others focus on historical events, political figures, and religious topics.

The cordel literature has its roots in the centuries-old European ballads and chapbooks. Slater notes that there are several traditions that are connected or contribute

¹³⁹ Candace Slater, *Stories on a String: The Brazilian Literatura de Cordel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), xiii-xiv.

¹⁴⁰ Candace Slater, "Terror in the Twin Towers: The Events of September 11 in Literatura de Cordel," *Latin American Research Review*, 38(3) (2003), 37-59.

to the cordel tradition. These include Portuguese written ballads and astrological almanacs, Brazilian improvised verse dialogues or contests (*desafios* or *pelejas*), which go back to the *tenzone* of the troubadours. Religious materials, Brazilian folktales known as *Histórias de Trancoso* and a range of other African and indigenous traditions also influence the folhetos. The invention of the printing press in fifteenth century Europe had brought about many novelties in print communication, and one of these was the appearance of chapbooks suspended for display at fairs, religious festivities, and brought along on pilgrimages. Even after the introduction of the press, cordel literature retained its strong oral and performative roots. Cordel literature was and continues to be written mostly in verses, and it targets a popular audience. These verses were traditionally transmitted orally, so they use popular language and they are accompanied by captivating illustrations. Also, since the cordel verses were initially sung, musical instruments would also accompany a given performance. Although today this genre of popular literature remains predominantly an experience of those living in the Northeast, migration from this region has carried and disseminated cordel literature throughout other regions of Brazil.

Felinto's Rísia is a cordel poet and clay-sculptor, her art inextricably linked to a defined geographical space: the Brazilian Northeast. Written in the first person, *The Women of Tijuco* draws readers into the story of this artist who uses her creativity to make a pilgrimage. Creativity is also the vehicle through which Rísia pays homage to the ecological elements and traditions of her homeland (not incidentally, the

birthplace of Brazilian culture).¹⁴¹ In this novel, creativity is premised upon the pilgrimage that compels our protagonist. The need to leave the familiar space of home, adopting the road as her new home, shows the role of the father-daughter relationship in Rísia's life. Traveling, adventure, and roads, as we've discussed, have traditionally been figured in literature as masculine activities and spaces. But in Felinto's novel, the protagonist's father uses the stories he tells his daughter as a means of bridging the intimate space of the home... the unknown space beyond the boundaries of hearth. From the opening of the novel, one realizes that the main character is saying goodbye to her parents and that her travel symbolizes the adoption of modes of knowing that will reveal wisdom and information about self, family, and world.

Family life motivates Rísia's personal odyssey toward Tijucopapo. As a child, Rísia leads a life she characterizes as "full of anxiety." Her family is poor, even for the economically poorest parts of Brazil. Both her mother and father were either neglected or abandoned as children. As an adult, her father is an adulterer who interacts violently with both his wife and children, and Rísia's mother is a coward who lacks the courage to overcome adversity. She shows her children little affection. At one moment in the novel, Rísia laments, "I am poor in father and mother. Poor, poor." Tormented by this family situation, young Rísia looks for a way to escape in the games she plays in her backyard. She pours dirt over her head and when her father spansks her for eating dirt,

¹⁴¹ It was in the Northeastern region, in the coastal zone, south of Bahia, that the Portuguese nobleman, navigator, and explorer, Pedro Álvares Cabral first set foot, in 1500, on the territory that would eventually be called Brazil. According to historian Boris Fausto, the northeast coast was the first center of colonization and urbanization in the newly acquired Portuguese territory. He writes, "the situation of Brazil's Northeast today is not a product of fate but of a historical process. Up until the middle of the 18th century, the Northeast was the center of the most significant economic and social going-ons in the colony. During that time the South was peripheral... Salvador was the capital of Brazil until 1763, and for a long time it was Brazil's only important city." (Boris Fausto, *A Concise History of Brazil*, trans. Arthur Brakel [Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 34).

she realizes that this is a means of provoking his anger (and getting his attention). Such scenes point to the dysfunctional dimension of their relationship.

Yet, their interaction as father and daughter takes on a more nurturing dimension when he tells her stories. He provides her with her first glimpse of a world beyond her small town, a world full of adventure. These stories demonstrate for Rísia their power to transform teller, listener, and physical setting. She learns that the listener is transported to worlds of limitless possibilities and the teller is the creator and fashioner of those new worlds, adventures, and perspectives. As an adult, Rísia harnesses those powers as she works to apply them to her own family history and “honor the child inside.” She uses this craft associated with her father to transform her genealogy into one she finds more viable. By creating and telling her improvised and imaginary journey to the legendary land of Tiju copapo, Rísia finds healing and gains a certain level of self-determination and illustrates a manifestation of ritualistic art. Not only does Rísia discover the answers to many of her family riddles in Tiju copapo, she creates an alternate family story through the population of a fantastic and revolutionary landscape.

In Felinto’s narrative, the paternal figure is emblematic of the mode of the journey, and the maternal figure is symbolic of both the origin and destination. It is through the journey (paternal) that Rísia travels toward her past and her future. Because Tiju copapo embodies both familial history and the ideal family Rísia seeks, it becomes imperative that she returns to and sort through her maternal lineage in order to accomplish her mission of self-fashioning, self-understanding, and healing. In *The Women of Tiju copapo*, origins and roots are tied to community and folk traditions. As

in adult living in São Paulo, Rísia feels restless and longs to escape the constraints of a home where she makes more money than her father, yet is constantly disrespected and lacking in privacy. She learns to dream in this ultra-urban space, and she dreams of another reality, an alternate family story, and a life with a “happy ending” like the ones in Hollywood movies. But to escape, she must accept the powerful legacy of her father: the power to tell a story and, most importantly, place herself as protagonist within that story.

The story Rísia creates is a journey away from the misery of her family sphere, a space that is symbolically linked to the first self one knows as a child. The first self is rooted in the home, but this first self suspects that there are spaces and worlds beyond the familiar, the maternal. These worlds include knowledge of science, politics, myth, travel, adventure, and community, and the father has access to these realms. He is an emblematic bridge to the worlds of knowledge and adventure. Rísia goes on her symbolic pilgrimage primarily through the act of story telling, accepting the connection that her father provides to the wider world and thus embracing her communal self. In other words, Rísia achieves a new level of awareness where self is defined in relation to community. With this awareness, Rísia uses folk, native, and local repertoire in reconfiguring her family genealogy. She looks at self, but as connected to others. *The Women of Tijucoapapo* emphasizes local history and how local communities take these histories and imbue them with mythical dimensions.

Felinto’s allusion to the Dutch invasions of Brazil’s Northeast represents one of such instances. The Dutch invasions of colonial Brazil are connected to the history of the sugar economy. The sugar industry was a vital part of socioeconomic activity in the

Northeast. Pernambuco and Bahia were sugar-producing centers of colonial Brazil due to a combination of high-quality topsoil and plenty of rain. The Dutch occupation of Salvador in 1624-1625 had disastrous effects on the sugar economy in Bahia. Another Dutch invasion between 1630 and 1637 also had a negative effect on the sugar industry in Pernambuco.¹⁴² It was during these many invasions by the Dutch that an interesting moment arose. According to local legends a group of women used tools from the kitchen to stave off Dutch soldiers. In her discussion of *The Women of Tijucopapo* Lélia Almeida cites Elódia Xavier's explanation of the historical basis of the legend of these female warriors.¹⁴³ Within Northeastern myth, then, Tijucopapo is held as a symbol of resistance. In 1646 a group of Dutch soldiers from the Brazilian colony called New Holland invaded another region of Pernambuco. According to this legend, a group of women from Tijucopapo fought off the starving troops with cooking pans and pepper and were victorious.

Since Rísia is familiar with this tale, she appropriates it and uses it to create an alternate personal history in which she honors the spirit of improvisation, resourcefulness and courage that she finds in this episode of local history. In so doing, she pays homage to the courage shown by the women of Tijucopapo through her own creation of art.

Felinto also revives and honors the affection with which the some Brazilians regard Lampião, an infamous bandit and rebel of the Northeast. Lampião—Virgulino Ferreira da Silva—grew up in the impoverished and arid backlands (*sertão*) of northeast

¹⁴² Fausto, *A Concise History of Brazil*, 34.

¹⁴³ Lélia Almeida "A solidão das mães-meninas-sem-mães," *Espéculo: Revista de estudos literários* 33 (July-October 2006). Accessed at <http://www.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero33/asolidao.html>

Brazil. His brush with the law, which started in 1916 when he was nineteen years old, was the factor that propelled him into a life of outlawry. When the police killed his father five years later, Lampião vowed to live and die as a bandit. Billy Jaynes Chandler describes the way Lampião managed his career as an outlaw:

Roaming within his band of malefactors on foot or horseback over several states, he lived by extortion, seizing persons for ransom, and robbery. He could be trustworthy, generous, and gentlemanly to those who earned his loyalty or struck his fancy; those who aroused his enmity were met with sackings, burnings, torture, and death. A wily fellow who was a consummate guerrilla warrior, he outwitted and vanquished the state military forces so often and so skillfully that his fellow backlanders came to believe he possessed extraordinary powers. Whatever the source of his religious fervor—he earned the fear and respect of a vast region. He purchased the police, met landed barons and political chiefs as equals and developed amicable relations with a state governor.¹⁴⁴

It is due to these exploits that Lampião became and remains one of the most fascinating figures of rural Brazil's oral traditions long after his death in 1938.

As late as the 1970s Lampião remained a staple of cordel literature.¹⁴⁵ Chandler remarks that Lampião's career was not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it was paradigmatic of a regional epidemic of banditry that began around 1900 and ended about forty years later. Banditry was such a prevalent part of Northeastern reality that the Nina Rodrigues Institute of Legal Medicine, located in Salvador Bahia, was keenly interested in studying, what was believed then to be the relationship between criminal conduct and phenotype, a topic that was in vogue at the time.¹⁴⁶ The bands of outlaws of the Brazilian Northeast were known as *cangaço* and the bandits themselves were

¹⁴⁴Billy Jaynes Chandler, *The Bandit King: Lampião of Brazil* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1978), 4.

¹⁴⁵*A Chegada de Lampião no Inferno / The Arrival of Lampião in Hell* and *Lampião: O Rei do Cangaço, Amores e Façanhas / Lampião: King of Cangaço: Love and Exploits* are among some of the titles of literatures from the 1970s that featured this legendary figure.

¹⁴⁶ Chandler, *The Bandit King*, 130.

called *cangaceiros*. When *cangaceiros* were caught their skulls would be examined, measured, classified, and displayed in the institute. This of course began the tradition of displaying the *cangaceiros*'s heads as trophies at the local police station. This is a fate that Lampião and his female companion, Maria Bonita (Pretty Mary), would also suffer. According Chandler, Lampião is "the twentieth century's most successful traditional rural bandit" and is most probably the last major figures of his kind.¹⁴⁷ As the world changes and that type of banditry is rapidly disappearing, the exploits of rebels and outlaws such as the American Jesse James, the Mexican Pancho Villa, and the English Robin Hood have been relegated to the realm of social legends. Yet, these wandering bandits continue to appeal to and resonate with many.

Lampião's courage and bravery are valuable qualities for one such as Rísia, who aspires to resist, rebel, and spur revolutionary change through her art. While revolutionary and heroic figures traditionally remembered have often been men, Felinto's heroine draws from both female and male rebels, revolutionaries, and folk heroes. The heroic Lampião, for instance, stands in contrast with Rísia's father, whose only redeeming quality in his relationship with his daughter is his role and dignity as the family's primary storyteller.

When her relationships with her father and her mother become too difficult to bear, art provides the solace Rísia needs to survive into adulthood. Though she is disappointed with her mother's cowardice and meekness, Rísia experiences more intense anger toward her father. Consequently, even as a child, she expresses her desire to kill him because of the wretched way he treats his family. As an adult, she feels her

¹⁴⁷ Chandler, *The Bandit King*, Preface.

father is the “reminder of all [her] mortifications.” In retrospect, Rísia remembers her childhood as one full of anxiety and unhappiness: “I come from a very poor family. It’s really horrible to be poor—you want to kill your father, you don’t love your mother.”¹⁴⁸ And what makes life intolerable is her suspicion that adulthood will be a repetition of childhood. To resist this fate, she becomes determined to use her artistic imagination and her appreciation of the physical landscape of her childhood to configure an alternative adulthood. These elements make it possible for the adult Rísia to continue to honor the fragile wishes and dreams of her childhood: “I’ll never disrespect the little girl that exists inside me. The little girl that exists inside me is seated on a throne” (Felinto 85). This little girl’s powerful imagination and the wisdom she has absorbed from her surroundings allow the adult Rísia to work through traumatic issues from her past. Her relationship with her abject father establishes a specific pattern for the way Rísia relates to the world.

Paternal presence in *The Women of Tijucopapo*, often tied to neglect and anger, is also connected to the impulse that motivates mobility and the journey toward self. Anthropologist Victor Turner proposes that the journey, as event, personal experience, and cultural symbol, accumulates many of communal meanings.¹⁴⁹ One of the most predominant meanings traditionally associated with journeying in the West is the idea of nomadic masculinity. Historian Eric J. Leeds describes how this “spermatic” travel provides men the opportunity to live self-defining experiences through the process of

¹⁴⁸ Felinto, *The Women of Tijucopapo*, 76. Please note that all other references to this book will occur within the text, with the page numbers noted in parentheses.

¹⁴⁹ See Sidonie Smith, *Moving Lives: 20th-Century Women’s Travel Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

crossing spaces and recording adventures in bricks, books, and stories.¹⁵⁰ Women on the other hand have traditionally been connected to what Leeds terms “the logic of sessility,” which normalizes the idea that women remain at home and that the road and travel are men’s dominion.¹⁵¹ Rísia, a female nomad, shows how it is possible to negotiate stasis and rootedness while simultaneously continuing to make progress toward her destination. The fact that Rísia imaginative journey is experienced primary on foot evokes another aspect of the cangaceiro experience. The bandits often traveled cross-country on foot. The prickly and thorny vegetation or *caatinga* of the backlands made it difficult to travel on horseback. Even the *volantes* or mobile police units were not provided with horses since they were expensive and trucks, which started being used in the backlands during the mid-1920s, were not a common mode of transportation since the roads were mostly cattle trails.¹⁵² By traveling on foot and later on a mare, Rísia reconnects herself with this tradition of mobility. Like those who typically journey on foot or by animal, she becomes literally and organically linked to the earth and the landscape of the Northeastern. These ecologically-rooted modes of travel allow Rísia to put the overcrowded metropolis of São Paulo behind her, re-commit herself to experiences that tie her to the earth, and free herself to materialize her dream of self-transformation.

Expanding on Leeds’s ideas, Sodonie Smith’s rich study on travel and women discusses the transformative power of travel for women and how female travelers have traditionally been represented in Western societies. Smith argues that traveling women

¹⁵⁰ Eric J. Leeds, *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 286.

¹⁵¹ Leeds, *The Mind of the Traveler*, 171.

¹⁵² Chandler, *The Bandit King*, 44.

used their narratives “to reimagine themselves” away from the constraints of femininity at home.¹⁵³ Rísia seems at the peak of her creativity as she crosses the forest and fields, passes through the open-air market of São José, interacts with a host of vegetable vendors, stays with a family living in a shack, or sits on a boulder in an open and mountainous space. This sort of interaction with the environment shapes the traveler’s temporal and spatial perception: “Without the encapsulating carapace, without the speed of railway or automobile travel, the traveler cannot easily detach herself from the space of travel. Evanescent reality... has been left behind for another kind of reality, a more immediate and situated reality recovered through a *visceral mobility*.”¹⁵⁴ And this is precisely what Felinto’s heroine represents: a woman’s visceral mobility.

Mounted behind a man on a mare’s back, Rísia crosses fields at a slow gallop. With a sense of heightened awareness that accompanies their pace, Rísia notices stable yards, mills, stony springs, vegetable gardens, orchards, and finally beds of red flowers. She hears the song of crickets, the chirping of the owls, and the howling of the wolves. These sights and sounds inspire her to compose a beautiful aria of her own with the “virile young man” accompanying her. Readers become aware that Rísia has already signaled a psychical transition into the deeper recess of her imagination, made possible by the effects of Recife, Brazil’s merciless sun. One can easily suffer a condition akin to delirium in Recife without having smoked peyote; the sheer intensity of heat causes the type of sunstroke that forces Rísia into another type of reality. She is virtually transported by the sun to another dimension or landscape. So like the cordel poet who

¹⁵³ Smith, *Moving Lives*, 20.

¹⁵⁴ Smith, *Moving Lives*, 32.

would experience several landscapes during his many travels, Rísia is experiencing both dreamscapes and ecological landscapes.

By invoking the spirit of the cordel poet, who was often male and who embodied the figure of both the traveler and the artist, Felinto extends the tradition of paternal storytellers. Irene Matthews's seemingly paradoxical idea of the "rooted traveler," found in the afterward to the English translation of Felinto's novel, comes into clear focus in the figure of the cordel poet. Just as Rísia knows she can never escape from her family and break her bond to them, no matter how far she travels, Rísia knows she is bound to the local traditions of the Northeast community where she was born. Family and communal traditions are integrated in the art that Rísia creates as cordel poet and rooted traveler. The career of the cordel poet incorporates travel, communal storytelling, and improvisational art; like those traditional story tellers, Rísia adopts the road as her home: "When I was ready to leave home, I left once and for all on this road that became my own. That became my home. At least it became my home, since my life would be always linked to theirs" (Felinto 74).

As a genre rooted in Iberian traditions in which gender roles ascribed to males the freedom to travel and women the duty to remain at home, cordel poetry was most often performed by and associated with the experiences of male travelers. The conquistadores brought these verses to the New World, and Brazil, this genre came to be called folhetos as the Portuguese settlers continued to import and later print these types of chapbooks. An alternate name for folhetos, *arrecifes*, signals the importance of Pernambuco's capital city, Recife, and other Northeastern cities in the production and

distribution of the folhetos.¹⁵⁵ Therefore, cordel literature is strongly linked to ideas of place, crossing of boundaries, regional experiences, and folk traditions. And though this literature is associated with a Northeastern city, the majority of cordel poets and readers have often been from an agricultural background. Consequently, those producing and reading this folk genre may live in cities, but their values and concerns remain rooted in rural worldviews. Since its heyday in the 1950s, Brazilian cordel literature's popularity has waned. Still, hundreds of new titles continue to appear each year; this literature plays a vital role in both Brazilian popular culture and even elite academic circles. Slater writes of the importance of the cordel literature to twentieth century Brazilian culture. She discovered that politicians, psychologists, historians, and religious leaders have used popular genre as a venue to publicize vital information to the masses.¹⁵⁶ Internationally acclaimed Brazilian writers such as Jorge Amado, Ariano Suassuna, José de Alencar, and João Cabral de Melo Neto have used the cordel tradition to create their masterpieces. Though ridiculed by some younger Brazilians who prefer to associate with modernity and cosmopolitan cultures, cordel literature is crucial to Brazilian literary and cultural imagination. It makes sense that Felinto, born in Recife, would gravitate toward this foundational genre, riffing on it the way musical and literary traditions around the globe have done.

The significance of oral traditions to Felinto's novel is not lost on those readers familiar with Brazilian myths and lore. According to Slater, the traditional cordel author and his customers have little or no formal education. It is often the eye-catching images on the cover or the vendor's oral performance that sells this product. The buyer,

¹⁵⁵ Slater, *Stories on a String*, 28.

¹⁵⁶ Slater, *Stories on a String*, xiv.

frequently illiterate, takes the folheto home and asks a neighbor or relative to re-read the story aloud to a group of listeners. It is in this tradition of collectively shared stories that Felinto grows up listening to her grandmother's orations. She echoes this experience by placing Rísia in a family where her father tells stories. Following in a tradition set forth by the most cherished connection she has with her father, Rísia, in turn, invents and shares stories with her siblings, who are merely alluded to in the text.

Returning to Felito's novel, we find Rísia conjuring another key ritual of her childhood. She remembers how she would make a fleet of paper-boats when the rainy season came. The possibility of escaping the familiar space of her town is introduced to Rísia while listening to her father's tales, and her paper boats carried her dreams of travel beyond the confines of her small neighborhood in Recife. In adulthood, she muses on her father's role as beloved storyteller immediately after revealing that, "*Robinson Crusoe* was the first great book I read" (Felinto 74). Connecting this classic story of a traveling man who finds himself stranded on an island with her feelings for her story-telling father highlights Rísia's artistic identity and its paternal ties. She confesses, "But the best stories were those my father told me, the idiot. My father told me stories like no one else has ever since. I stopped here about twenty days and composed an aria *recomposing the stories my father told me*" (Felinto 74). We see Rísia's perspective on paternal involvement in her life through the act of storytelling, her long cherished desire to embrace an "elsewhere," and how, for her, creativity is fueled by her feelings toward her family (particularly toward her father).

Like Felito's own family, adolescent Rísia's family eventually migrates from Recife to São Paulo. The city is not what Rísia envisioned. She finds herself living a

life in which she needs to invent dreams and wants the world to come to an end. A key characteristic of the novel is its dreamlike quality. In a dreamlike manner, the text shifts through direct focus narrative and flashback without pinpointing a timeline. It reads as a memory, unreliable and fragmented in its details, but undeniable whole. The desire to invent dreams reveals the fact that Rísia is overcome by a sense of restlessness. She decides to take action: “I was forced to choose to leave. I’m painting a revolution in crayon colors... In the city I’m leaving from, that huge city of building sites and people and cars and garbage going by and city life-styles, the people are playing a losing game.” But what seems to disturb Rísia and breed a sense of foreboding and despair is the fact that “...things do happen, and stories take place in the thousands, but stories also get lost in their thousands, they die right where they are born. Every person is a lost story” (Felinto 55). Mass migration from the Northeast to São Paulo was characteristic of Brazilian life in the twentieth century. For many migrants from the underdeveloped backlands, the large urban spaces of São Paulo proved to be somewhat disorientating and often signaled a loss of communal connections. Those experiencing this transition not only learn to adapt to a new space and new rules of survival, but also find that their cherished communal support system is diminished.

Ironically, after years of living in the megalopolis of São Paulo, “elsewhere” becomes less appealing to Rísia. She has been disillusioned by the sophisticated São Paulo, and shifts the spatial location of an idealized “elsewhere” from the ultra-urban to that of a rural landscape. The adult Rísia now seeks salvation in retracing her steps, moving backwards toward the actual landscape of the Northeast of her childhood. So if, as Virginia Woolf insists, we think back through our mothers, Rísia seems to assert we

think forward through our fathers, toward a world of adventure, beyond the present and familiar space of hearth and home. But when the promises of the wider world remain unrealized, it is imperative to think past our mothers and travel beyond our fathers. Ideas of elsewhere and movement toward the unknown and unfamiliar places in this novel are intimately associated with paternal memories. Rísia's narrative reveals that while the destination is connected to the maternal, the actual act of traveling is paternal in nature. In contrast to this paternal logic of adventure is the maternal element of women as sessile, yet creative members of a community. In Felinto's novel, one sees what Minh-ha T. Trinh describes as the image of woman as guardians of tradition, keepers of home, and bearers of language.¹⁵⁷ Thus Rísia's quest marries traditional images and acts associated with both males and females. She forges a new identity by embracing the strength she finds in her maternal history, but she uses the paternal movement and nomadic ways to leave behind memories of loss and misery and figuratively give birth to a stronger and more holistic self.

This concept of "mother" is particularly strong when Rísia talks about Tijucoapapo as a kind of threshold that lies between her past and her future. While Tijucoapapo can be seen as her destination, it is also the point at which Rísia is obligated to shed the old self and embrace a newness of life. Jessica Enevold argues that travel can represent "a spiritual midwife, a redeeming rite de passage"¹⁵⁸ Rísia travels hoping to be re-born in Tijucoapapo. Rebirth is the beginning of the new direction Rísia so fervently seeks.

¹⁵⁷ Minh-ha T. Trinh, "Other than Myself/My Other Self," in George Robertson et al., eds., *Travelers' Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement*, 9-26 (London: Routledge, 1994).

¹⁵⁸ Jessica Enevold, *Women on the Road: Regendering Narratives of Mobility* (Göteborg, Sweden: Blekinge Institute of Technology and Göteborg University, 2003), 94.

Rísia explicitly describes her symbolic journey as a process of re-birth, because it takes place in the span of nine months (Felinto 112). In the womb, she reflects, she was privy to the secrets of her mother's true heritage. "It was in Tijucopapo that my mother was born. Although all that is hidden from me. But still I do know about what she told me in moments of sad desperation, and about what I know I am, and about what comes from her, and what I heard inside her belly, and about what is traced on her brow and in our fate, my fate and hers" (Felinto 1). When she is born again, Rísia believe she can once again access a powerful, hidden knowledge.

After nine months of traveling, Rísia falls off a mare and thus falls into the realm of Tijucopapo. This downward motion is the culmination of Rísia's rite of passage into womanhood. During this encounter with the women of Tijucopapo, she sheds the burdensome memories of childhood and embraces a new self, integrating at once her individual and communal dimensions. The utopian community of dark-skinned Amazons Rísia encounters when she falls into Tijucopapo is a vision of agency. These women wield control over their destinies. Rísia has fallen into a space peopled by the mother figures she had long desired: "strong women, with long braids hanging down their backs" (Felinto 110).

Rísia believes that the hostesses she meets when she falls off her horse and wakes up in Tijucopapo belong to the same clan of women who fought off the Dutch invasion of their community with pots in hand back in 1646. The women standing around her bed extending her protection and comfort were also "good-looking women, strong women, women with faces darkened from long walks under the sun." Rísia seems to correlate these women's physical appearance with the same kind of *esprit de*

corps exhibited by the courageous women of 1646. Even as she witnesses their presence, Rísia cannot eschew a latent reminder of the fact that the stifling heat of the Northeast sun can sometimes induce hallucinations: “Real women? One of them touched my forehead. Real women. But women of a certain type. Was I delirious? *I wasn’t delirious. It was just that I had already seen those women being born, in an illustration in a book, perhaps, back in school, a book with poems on seriema*” (Felinto 112). For Rísia, real women are the stuff of legends. “Real” cannot possibly be a pitiful mother who is so deep in her misery that she cannot show affection for her children. “Real” cannot possibly be an unfaithful and abject father. So, Rísia chooses to embrace the women of her imagination as her true roots:

So there were women like that, my heritage, women who were not my mother. They were women I had seen born, that had to be it. They had to be it. In that book of mine, a schoolbook, a book with a red figure done in wax crayon, perhaps? A landscape? A revolutionary landscape with women warriors... Those women, who were not my mother, bore the mark of women who ran wild into the world astride their horses, amazons, defending themselves no one quite know from what; all that we know is, from love (Felinto 113).

This idea of movement and motion are certainly made patent in the dynamic, zigzag structure of Felinto’s novel. The stream of consciousness first person narrative lets readers feel they are moving along with the protagonist even as the plot at times seems to move backwards, repeating ideas mentioned pages earlier. The unconventional mixture of future, conditional, and past tenses is also emblematic of the novel’s signature momentum. When Rísia suffers her most traumatic adulthood loss, for example, she has a difficult time accepting a new reality. She cannot bear to live without Jonas, the love of her life: “Once upon a time, just once, I lost the love of a man and set out on a route thousands of miles long weeping of death and fear... When you

died, I'm going to write an elegy... My desire as I get up, or don't get up, everyday is to not believe it: 'Did you die?'... Please, don't have died." Rísia mourns her loss of Jonas the way only a woman who completely integrates the natural world into her personal community can: "When you died I take off into the fields like a startled mare... the field is green and infinite. That's the only way I save myself: by being in an infinite field where you are not the boundary" (Felinto 48-49). Just as in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, the protagonist's momentum gives Felinto's text a meditative dimension, placing the future in conversation with the past. *The Women of Tijucopapo*, then, feels like a narration of meditation in motion.

Like any storyteller, Rísia's also recounts various versions of a fragmented story of her origins. At times, readers may find themselves returning to previous pages to verify a new fragment of Rísia's maternal history. Trying to pin down facts, we ask ourselves whether her mother was born in Poti or in Tijucopapo, but as the novel draws closer to the end, it becomes clear that the actual place of maternal origin is not the point. It is most relevant that Rísia is an artist, and she chooses Tijucopapo, a land where women are strong and fight for justice against those who threatens their community. This choice requires movement from what life has offered and what she chooses to claim, and physical movement's central place in Rísia's story is no accident. In many ways her narrative pays homage to the literary-geographical traditions of the Brazilian Northeast through a revision of this social corpus. Rísia's pilgrimage can be read as the journey of a modern-day *cordel* poet obligated by her past to improvise a new genealogy for herself, and it is movement that facilitates and makes this creative process possible.

Earlier, I remarked on how Irene Matthews, Felinto's English translator, names *The Women of Tijucopapo* as part of a literary lineage of "rooted travelers" that includes the fiction of black and Native American women writers in North America (Felinto 128). Among these women—Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Alice Walker—there is an undeniably strong sense of place in narrative of their journeying heroines, which is manifested through the evocation of ecological elements and regionally-specific artistic traditions.

Felinto's text shows the interdependence between the physical environment and ritualistic art. The ecological dimensions of *The Women of Tijucopapo* are even implicated in the title of the novel, which evokes the Northeastern *tijuco* clay. From childhood, Rísia displays a keen awareness and appreciation for her surroundings. Her personal way of seeing integrates ecological dimensions and climactic patterns associated with Recife into her very perception of who she is in relation to the rest of Brazil.

The primacy of native and local materials is highlighted in the art Rísia creates and in the manifestation of her ecological self, are permeating her body and soul. Rísia expresses her desire to become rain, she ingests dirt, she allows the sun's rays to penetrate and stimulate her imagination. The afternoon heat in Recife has a hallucinatory effect on Rísia's thinking and often leads her to explore imaginative spaces (Felinto 32). She dubs the trees and the frogs as "presences," witnesses, and participants in her life story, making the environment a part of her immediate community. And like her human family, the environment provides raw materials for her work *and* performs work on her, the artist, inspiring and making demands of her. It

is as though, like Danticat's Ka, Felinto's Rísia is experiencing a kind of power associated with ancestral spirit when interacting with the materials of her artistry.

The Women of Tijuco combines the idea of identity with the ecology of the Northeast mainly through the presentation of the earthy images traditionally associated with maternal figures and female fertility (rain, heat, clay, birth). *Tijuco* is a type of clay from which Rísia's genealogy is fashioned. She declares "I am made of filthy mud" and Tijuco seems to be located "at the point where the beach meets the mud, the black *tijuco* clay" (Felinto 112). These two narrative moments echoes the biblical scene of God's creation of the human race. Using the materials from her physical environment of her childhood, Rísia manipulates dirt, the *tijuco* clay, and rain puddles to both define and make a place for herself in the confusing and sometimes cruel adult world around her. The word "*papo*" in Portuguese means esophagus, and thus evokes notions of ingestion. Rísia literally partakes of the physical landscape by ingesting dirt. Through this act she is invigorated by the earth, gains insight, ancestral wisdom, and inspiration. Since Rísia's father introduced her to the world of imagination through the stories he would share, Rísia is empowered to create rituals based on this paternal act, which itself is premised on imagination and innovation. When Rísia's father neglects his daughter, she learns to fulfill for herself, a function she associates with her father. She becomes a storyteller, and thus weaves tales that function as alternate stories of identity and origin.

Because her art is done in the name of healing, her body, spirit, and re-integration into community, Rísia's art is similar to the art created by Danticat's Ka and Jone's Ursa. However, Rísia's ritualistic art is distinct, since her innovations are deeply

embodied art. Rísia's artistry is often dependent on dreamlike and altered states of consciousness driven by the natural elements in her physical surroundings. This is illustrated when she defies her father by bathing and symbolically baptizing herself in dirt from her backyard. This ritual of defiance, which also includes ingesting dirt and defecating worms, places Rísia in a relationship of direct exchange or communion with the earth. This childhood ritual foreshadows Rísia's eventual decision to induct herself into the community of earthy, legendary women named after *tijuco* clay. By introducing a part of the earth into her body Rísia invokes, for readers, cannibalism as a symbolic act that Brazilian modernists used to articulate national and cultural identities. In *Utopias of Otherness* (2003), Fernando Arenas describes "cannibalism" or anthropophagy "the quintessential Brazilian cultural metaphor" for Brazilian identity.¹⁵⁹ In Rísia's narrative, this metaphor is expanded through artistic and imaginative production that is ritualistically driven. Felinto's protagonist sculpts mud left behind by the recent rain as a way of mourning and commemorating the death of a baby brother; this cannibalistic integration of foreign elements continues when she allows the Recife sun to transport her into a trance-like and hallucinatory state. Rísia notes that Recife's delirium is like the effects of peyote; made from Northeastern cactus, peyote is also a marker of place and spiritual traditions used for centuries by indigenous peoples of various parts of the Americas for ritualistic and ceremonial purposes. The Recife heat erodes the threshold between the physical landscape and the landscape of her imagination.

¹⁵⁹ Fernando Arenas, *Utopias of Otherness: Nationhood and Subjectivity in Portugal and Brazil* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 32.

The powerful relationship between Rísia and the environment is similar to the telluric vision that Ronaldes de Melo e Souza describes in *A Geopoética de Euclides da Cunha*.¹⁶⁰ In this text Melo e Souza focuses primarily on Euclides da Cunha's masterpiece, *Os Sertões*. This narrative, which was first published in 1902, is based on the author's experiences in Bahia in the wake of The War of Canudos (1896-1897).¹⁶¹ Using scientific and artistic prose styles, Cunha used the journalistic articles he wrote as a correspondent for the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* to produce a text that incorporates questions and topics often explored in sociology, geography, history and philosophy. Yet one of the most powerful aspects of *Os Sertões* may be attributed to the fact that it may also be interpreted as an epic poem that depicts the daily struggles that peoples of the backlands wage against the Northeastern landscape and agents of the government.

According to Melo e Souza, one of Brazil's most internationally celebrated writers, Euclides da Cunha, privileges ecological elements to such an extent that the rain, the sun, the land, the sea, and the jungle become the protagonists who drive the story forward. Melo e Souza argues that in Cunha's masterpiece, *Os Sertões*,¹⁶² the narrator assumes six "narrative masks" in order to experience the qualitative diversity of

¹⁶⁰ Ronaldes de Melo e Souza, *A Geopoética de Euclides da Cunha* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: EdUERJ, 2009).

¹⁶¹ Led by Antonio Conselheiro, the War of Canudos was a regional/religious/political conflict that took place about a decade after the proclamation of the Brazilian Republic in 1889. As one of the most violent wars ever fought in the country, the war of Canudos was the struggle between the Brazilian Armed Forces and a religious messianic community of about 30,000 inhabitants located in the semi-arid backland community of Canudos (in the Northeastern state of Bahia). Eventually the Conselheiro and some of his followers came to understand that they were fighting a losing battle and so they went off toward the interior hoping to find a place free of persecution. (Lori Madden, "The Canudos War in History" *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 30 (2) Special Issue: "The World Out of Which Canudos Came" (Winter 1993), 5-7.)

¹⁶² Euclides da Cunha, *Os Sertões* (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Francisco Alves, 1968).

terra ignota or the unknown land of the backlands (the *sertão*).¹⁶³ These narrative masks converge in a narrator with an intimate relationship with the telluric potential of the *sertão*. This specific relationship between people and the environment, Melo e Souza argues, conveys a particular message about Cunha's aesthetic:

*A originalidade da narrativa euclidiana do sertão e da selva consiste em conceber a terra como protagonista do drama que se representa. Ao representar a terra como a vasta metamorfose de um organismo vivo, o narrador euclidiano suplanta a tradição hegemônica do conhecimento ocidental-europeu, que se define na antiga separação do espírito e da natureza e na moderna dicotomia do sujeito e do objeto. Por isso mesmo não se depreende o sentido de sua obra no contexto tradicional do divórcio da razão e da imaginação.*¹⁶⁴

The originality of Euclidian narrative about the backlands and the jungle is rooted in the conception of land as protagonist of the drama it represents. By representing the land as a vast metamorphosis of a living organism, the Euclidian narrator replaces the hegemonic tradition of Eurocentric knowledge, which defines itself within the long-standing separation between spirit and nature and within the modern dichotomy of subject and object. It is precisely for this reason that (Cunha's) work cannot effectively be understood in the context of the traditional divorce between reason and imagination.

In the work of Cunha, we see a theme that is prevalent in most Northeast Brazilian communities: the land is transformed into a protagonist, a living and breathing organism. The land with its arid climate often suffers from cycles of draught and floods. *Tijuco* clay is a product of such floods, but it may also conjure images associated with dirt such as mud, swamps, and other residual matter from heavy rainfall. Cunha's narrators resist the traditional Western notion of a mind/body split as well as the modern dichotomy of subject (human being) and object (the landscape). Consequently, Euclidian work is best understood by avoiding any critical lens that separates reason from imagination. The tenets of Cunha's geopoetics and aesthetic are

¹⁶³ Melo e Souza, *A Geopoética de Euclides da Cunha*, 8-9.

¹⁶⁴ Melo e Souza, *A Geopoética de Euclides da Cunha*, 10.

later incarnated in the prose of such well-known writers as Guimarães Rosa and the verses of poets such as Manoel de Barros.¹⁶⁵

As heir of this literary tradition, Felinto dedicates herself to portraying a close relationship between land and narrator while simultaneously promoting the type of fiction that marries imagination and reason. This is clearly seen in *The Women of Tijucopaco*, particularly during moments when Rísia literally integrates ecological elements (earth, rain, sun) into her body. By welcoming these elements a part of her very being, Rísia is given access to primordial and telluric knowledge most effectively articulated through the grammar of the imagination.

In expressing how poverty has shaped her imagination and world-vision Rísia admits: “There are times when I hate fortune’s little darlings because I don’t know how to understand those sorts of people who never ate earth nor shat worms. People who were never hungry or thirsty” (Felinto 60). Felinto’s novel, for the most part, remains a fragmented narrative of a woman’s personal odyssey, steering clear of any sort of political commitment or message. Yet class and social injustices rooted in class

¹⁶⁵ Manoel de Barros is a contemporary Brazilian poet often associated with the Brazilian modernist movement as well as with the group of writers known as the “Geração de 45” (“Generation of 45”). The Brazilian modernism was a movement of the late 1920s that incorporated a wide range of cultural and artistic ideas. Having had contact with the artistic avant-gardes of Europe before World War I, young Brazilian writers and plastic artists produced works that were much like cultural mosaics. More specifically, they took Cubist, Futurist, and later, Surrealist techniques and fused them with Indigenous and African elements to renovate and generate nationalistic art. The result would be art that emerges from a symbolic ingestion or cannibalistic appropriation of foreign cultural elements in order to produce something new. This is an idea that was developed and summarized in Oswald de Andrade’s “Manifesto Antropófago,” 1928. Such an aesthetic approach is aptly illustrated in his brother, Mário de Andrade’s work. As one of Brazil’s greatest writers and a key figure of the modernist movement, Mário de Andrade along with other artists and writers such as Tarsila do Amaral, Victor Brecheret, and Heitor Villa Lobos, juxtaposed and mixed anachronistic and eclectic cultural elements (indigenous-colonial myths) to create art they hoped would be self-affirmative and representative of a distinctively Brazilian aesthetic. The results of their aspirations are iconoclastically illustrated in Mário de Andrade’s novel *Macunaima* (1928) and Tarsila do Amaral’s painting. The *Semana de Arte Moderna/Week of Modern Art*, which took place in São Paulo on February 13, 15, and 17 of 1922, is considered the apex of this cultural movement. Each day was dedicated to the presentation of distinctive artistic forms: painting and sculpture, poetry, music and literature.

differences are clearly of concern for both the author and her heroine. Rísia suffers from hunger, not only for food, but also for parental affection. In relating the background of both of her parents, the connection between poverty and parental neglect and apathy is highlighted. Poverty, Rísia seems to say, degrades affection, familial ties, and values. Remembering one of her mother's pregnancies, Rísia recalls how her mother, worn down by depression, looked so much "like twigs" she would play with in her back yard. Rísia worried and followed as her mother completed errands around town; she personally lived the burden of her mother's misery and pathetic life. She also remembers how she longed to feel her mother's reassuring embrace. Rísia hungered for affection. Like her mother, her father and her aunt suffered from the consequences of poverty aggravated by lovelessness. "I sat down on a stone and strummed out a tune on the guitar I carried: Children don't do what I have done I couldn't walk I tried to run" (Felinto 91). This cautionary song shows Rísia's desire to use her art and experiences to connect with her community. Yet most significant is the desire to clarify the political situation that creates the abject family atmosphere that so often characterizes and plagues her community:

Then I still tried out different colors with my wax crayons on a revolutionary landscape... I came to make the revolution that knocks down... those guilty of all the lovelessness I suffered and all the poverty in which I lived. I'm going to tell all the wretched workers in the factory that they are unhappily wretches because there are brightly lighted parties taking place in São Paulo. To the children of the factory workers I'll say no, it's not their parents who are to blame when they get beaten because they eat dirt and shit worms. I know who are. And, to the wives of the factory workers, I'll say that in case they are betrayed and their husbands beat up on them, it's not really their husbands who are to blame. I know who are (Felinto 91-92).

Rísia's has survived the experience of being surrounded by adults who survived childhoods of abandonment. Like Ursa in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, Rísia's deepest desire as an adult is to move beyond that debilitating cycle of lovelessness, trauma, and misery, and she employs her talents as artist to create rituals that allow her to think past her familial legacy. As cordel poet, musician, and sculptor, Rísia is ready to improvise an alternate family genealogy; she consciously creates an alternate future where Hollywood endings are possible (Felinto 92). Rísia acknowledges her ability to create fantastic landscapes, forge alternate worlds, and seek possible solutions. The key feature of the most complex landscape she creates is that it is imbued with the spirit of revolution: "But I can transform the world with wax crayons. I'm going to paint a revolution" (Felinto 85).

In the latter half of Felinto's novel, Brazil and its various histories of violence are invoked through Rísia's seemingly obsessive repetition of the idea of revolution. Two revolutionary periods (the era between 1930-1954 and the period between 1964 and 1985) can best historically contextualize Rísia's narrative. For Brazil, these two moments represent key moments of rapid social transformation, whether populist and leftist or conservative and right-winged.

The era of Getúlio Vargas's regime in the 1930s has often been identified as the birth of modern Brazil. After the Brazilian Empire ended in 1889, a series of social and economic changes brought about the declaration of a republic. These changes included the replacement of the old plantation oligarchies of São Paulo and Minas Gerais by a new industrial class. The Brazilian Revolution of 1930 led to a coup d'état that brought

Liberal Alliance candidate Getúlio Vargas into power. Before coming to power he was a populist governor of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil's southernmost state.

Interestingly the Brazilian Revolution, populist on the surface, was actually propelled by the regionally dominant oligarchs (the gauchos of the Rio Grande do Sul and the sugar barons of the Northeast). Essentially, urban groups were at the forefront of a revolution in which the landed elites still had much influence. Although Vargas himself was from a family of landed cattle ranchers, his particular vision for bringing about national development was grounded in the fact that he was an economic nationalist who favored industrial development and liberal reform. In order to govern Brazil, Vargas was faced with a balancing act that included promoting policies that would maintain friendly relations between workers and owners of urban factories while also backing bourgeoisie and landed interests. So from 1930-1932, Vargas followed a populist reformist path. A conservative counterrevolution in 1932 marked the beginning of the end of Vargas's reformist intentions. Vargas's *laissez faire* attitude toward the landowners of the semi-feudal Northeast aggravated the disparities between the impoverished Northeast and the industrializing South. This signaled the beginning of a shift in power between the north and the south that has lasted until today.

Vargas's social reformist stance had shifted and became more right-wing by 1934. He abandoned his populist path and liberal capitalism in favor of the repressive fascist tactics used by Mussolini in Italy and Salazar in Portugal. Changing conditions on the international stage (such as the effects of the crash of the U.S. stock market of 1929) affected Vargas's plans, as did the pressure to maintain alliances with the landed elites and the São Paulo establishment. By abdicating his promises, the man once know

as “father of the poor” was faced with an increasingly visible pro-Communist sector of labor groups who were aligning themselves with the rural peasants (who demanded land reforms) against the planter oligarchies. Vargas remained in power until 1945 when he is ousted by the military. Then the 1950 elections restored Vargas back to power. He ruled Brazil until his suicide in 1954. For the next decade several civilian presidents governed Brazil.¹⁶⁶

The next era of multiple revolutions in Brazil began in the 1960s. The years between 1964-1985 represent a time of wide-scale social mobilization for various sectors of Brazilian society. This is true for the military, right-wing conservatives, armed leftist groups, and left-wing intellectuals and artists. Each group espoused distinct ideas on how to best bring about processes such as modernization, industrialization, greater economic diversification, and self-sufficiency. As a result, these years brought about numerous shifts in the political stance and direction taken by those who alternately governed Brazil. The military dictatorship lasted from 1964 to 1984. Throughout this period, different political figures assumed the leadership, some being from the moderate right wing and others from the extreme right wing. Severe repressive measures were taken against all forms of opposition, particularly at the height of the regime between 1968 and 1973. Ernesto Geisel, from the moderate wing of the military, was president from 1974 until 1979. Geisel worked on getting Brazil back on a democratic path. He also took various measures that promoted reconciliation between various sectors that were at odds with each other during the military rule. He granted amnesty to political dissidents and guerrilla fighters, pushed for the return of

¹⁶⁶ Fausto, *A Concise History of Brazil*, 190-236.

those exiled from the country, and reestablished freedom of expression. From that moment forward, there has been a gradual return to democratic practices in Brazil.

The period from 1978 to 1984 is the transition moment known as the *abertura* or opening, which “contributed to the significant growth of new social movements: movements on behalf of women, landless peasant, Afro-Brazilians, gays and lesbians, the environment, Brazilian Indians, street children, and so on.”¹⁶⁷ Leftist artists and intellectuals of the 1960s viewed art as a tool to be placed at the service of societal change and social mobilization:

*Eu me lembro dos hoje “incríveis anos 60” como um momento extraordinariamente marcado pelos debates em torno do engajamento e da eficácia revolucionária da palavra poética, palavra que, naquela hora, se representava como muito poderosa e até mesmo como instrumento de projetos de tomada do poder.*¹⁶⁸

I remember as if it were today the “incredible 60s” as a moment extraordinarily marked by debates around social engagement and the revolutionary potential of the poetic word, a word which, at the time, presented itself as being very powerful and even an instrument that could be used to take over [political] power.

What some Brazilian view as the failure of the armed struggle to bring about more satisfactory results for the poor and disenfranchised members of society has left what Ridenti calls “a ghostly legacy” for Brazil.¹⁶⁹ Initially published in 1982, Felinto’s *The Women of Tijucoapapo* documents leftists’ national sentiments as they relate to rapid shifts in the sociopolitical fabric of Brazil. Felinto’s brand of socialism, and perhaps even her brand of feminism, is invariably shaped by the fact that she is a writer who was born in the Northeast and raised by migrant parents in São Paulo. By

¹⁶⁷ Arenas, *Utopias of Otherness*, 35-37.

¹⁶⁸ Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda *Expressões Viagem: CPC, Vanguarda e Desbunde: 19760/70* (São Paulo, Brazil: Editora Brasiliense, 1980), 15.

¹⁶⁹ Marcelo Ridenti, *O fantasma da revolução brasileira* (São Paulo, Brazil: Editora UNESP, 1993). 41.

presenting her reader with a little heroine who longs to kill her father for the way he treats women, Felinto highlights how revolutionary seeds are planted from childhood, but are cultivated by the power of the imagination. Rísia seeks a happy ending, which is a very personal goal. Yet she also seems to understand that this cannot occur if poverty and social injustices continue to plague her community.

I am poor in father and mother. Poor, poor. Is that fair? I ask myself if it's fair to ask if it's fair. The sense of fairness is already lost in that unfair way of asking. Is it fair? What can be considered fair? I ask myself as I walk on the bridge and see the beggars. Is it fair?... I walk on the bridge and there are beggars lining my path. And robbers and prostitutes. So I don't identify with them. And yet I do. I stare at them but I don't see myself in the pupil of their eyes. And yet I do (Felinto 61).

This urban scene, which could just as easily represented the manifestation of poverty in a Northeastern town, brings Rísia to the realization that being “poor in mother and father” is symptomatic of the fact that she, Rísia, is just as much a victim of social injustices as are beggars, robbers, and prostitutes. She aspires for social change and is keenly conscious of who is to blame for the destitution she witnesses and knows.

I came to make the revolution that knocks down not my Guaraná¹⁷⁰ on the counter, but those guilty of all the lovelessness I suffered and all the poverty in which I lived. I'm going to tell all the wretched workers in the factory that they are unhappy wretches because there are brightly lighted parties taking place in São Paulo. And, if they wanted to, they would drink a whole Guaraná... To the children of the factory workers I'll say no, it's not their parents who are to blame when they get beaten because they eat dirt and shit worms. I know who are. And, to the wives of the factory workers, I'll say that, in case they are betrayed and their husbands beat up on them, it's not really their husbands who are to blame. I know who are (Felinto 92).

Rísia uses collective experiences to make sense of moments from her difficult childhood. Public life at the factory has a strong influence on the personal dynamics

¹⁷⁰ A popular soft drink her parents could hardly afford to buy for her. When it was bought it had to be shared with others. This is a precious commodity for Rísia.

with the family. Thus the revolution she aspires to make will involve as well as benefit her community as well.

Revolution, as a spectral presence, haunts the Brazilian imagination—and Rísia's art. She explains, "I'm traveling to paint the revolution... I'm going to Tijucopapo to see if I know why I am poor. Afterwards, I'll paint the revolution" (Felinto 83). Rísia's desire to address, at a broader level, the violence that has shaped her from childhood, instills revolutionary ideals.

As a precocious child, Rísia notes the class inequalities that make up her reality, and as an adult, she searches for a solution in historical discourses of revolution. She finds it unfair that one of her rich classmates, Libânia, has a father who picks her up from school in a car and spends time with her: "I wanted to be like Libânia... Libânia was an individual. Libânia had personality. And Libânia had a father" (Felinto 15). This in contrast to her own "not-father" who refuses to buy her bubble gum, which in Rísia's childish perspective would represent an expression of his affection for her (Felinto 9). Rísia observes the ways social-economic inequalities and injustices deeply influence the family dynamics of her home. The poverty and misery in her home cannot be blamed solely on her abject father and her passive mother, but on a more powerful and virtually invisible social order. It is against this social order, it has long been believed, that the Brazilian folk hero, Lampião fought. Typical cangaceiros are said to fall outside the law only because of circumstances and necessity demand that they do. They were known to avenge wrongs done to them and their families. According to Chandler, seeing the cangaceiros as avengers of injustices "gained acceptance among intellectuals who surveyed the happenings from than among the

inhabitants of the zones in which the bandits spread their murder and destruction.”¹⁷¹ In local and perhaps national lore, Lampião represents the sort of lawlessness that is anti-local elite and anti-state control. While those living in the backlands of the Brazilian Northeast have often felt like the isolated orphans of the Brazilian state, they also show low tolerance for the violence and control of a distant and centralized government that seems indifferent to the difficulties and injustices of their day-to-day lives. As a local version of Robin Hood, Lampião has been lifted to the level of legend for his ruthlessness, strength, and stamina. Consequentially, Lampião may be considered a fitting iconography for revolutionary narratives in which the search for justice was privileged. The bandit king perfectly matches the landscape of conflict that Rísia creates.

In folk imagination, Lampião takes justice into his own hands; fighting against the prevailing social order in the backlands requires violence. Rísia incorporates a similar spirit of rebellion into this landscape that she is creating and entering. She uses her “talent to delude [herself]” to invent a mythical space in which the figure of the infamous Northeastern bandit, Lampião and his primary nemeses the *macacos/monkeys* are given new life in the story she improvises as she journeys to Tijucoapapo. Rísia integrates these historical and yet mythical elements into her story and into her “psychic space.”¹⁷² Folktales, oral narratives, regional theatre, stories propagated through the poetic cordel literature (and more recently, film) have all made Lampião into a hero who represents the spirit of the Northeastern resistance. As Frederico Pernambuco de

¹⁷¹ Chandler, *The Bandit King*, 5.

¹⁷² Kelly Oliver, *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Theory of Social Oppression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

Mello remarks, it is fascinating how Lampião is remembered not as a villain, but as a hero:

*Além de servir de tema, desde os iniciais de suas façanhas, ao ciclo vastíssimo de literatura de cordel... não sabemos de nome de brasileiro que rivalize com o de Lampião em número de biografias. A tendência do povo é convertê-lo num símbolo imaculado de resistência dos humildes à opressão das elites, de nada valendo as provas históricas de ter ele sido protegido até mesmo por um governador de Estado... Nada importa. O povo precisa de seu Robin Hood.*¹⁷³

In addition to serving as a reoccurring theme, since the beginning, of a vast body of cordel literature... we know of no other Brazilian name that could possibly rival that of Lampião in terms of the sheer number of biographies published. People have a tendency to convert him into an impeccable symbol of poor people's resistance to the oppression suffered at the hands of the elite. They often prefer to disregard historical proof that he was being protected even by the governor of the State... It does not matter to them. The people needed their Robin Hood.

Felinto also incorporates the story of the women involved in these legends of Northeastern banditry. In 1930 or 1931, Lampião had been seen with the wife of a cobbler from Santa Brígida named José Nenem. Maria was raised on her father's ranch in Jeremoabo, Bahia. Since she was not particularly happy in her marriage, she often spent time at her parents's ranch. The ranch was located in an area that bordered Bahia and Sergipe, a place through which infamous bandit often traveled. Like most inhabitants of the backlands, Maria and her family may have feared and held Lampião in high regard. On one occasion, Lampião came by the family ranch and learned of Maria's admiration for him. It is said that he fell in love with her and when he departed a few days later, he had her mother's blessing to take her with him. Although Lampião

¹⁷³ Frederico Pernambucano de Mello, *Quem Foi Lampião?* (Recife, Brazil: Editora Stahli, 1993), 87.

may have been the first among his band to take a female companion, later on some of the other bandits took companions as well.¹⁷⁴

It is in memory of this chapter of Northeastern banditry that Felinto resuscitates and evokes these female presences when Rísia reenacts the role of Maria Bonita. As one of the few female members of Lampião's posse, she became a person of renown by virtue of her association with the celebrated bandit. As cultural and folk symbol, Maria is easily adapted to the story that Rísia masterfully improvises on her journey toward Tijucopapo. As she enters Pernambuco territory, Rísia finds herself closer to her destination. Rísia is keenly conscious that she has the power to create landscapes where reality (physical space) and fantasy (psychic space) blur: "Things were happening in an interval of fantasy." This is to say, she has control of what happens in this space. Rísia wakes up one morning to the sound of bombs and gunshots, and she wonders: "Who had planned this war that I invented? Who made this war into a war? That man? The women in Tijucopapo? Who had stolen my plan? Was it the sun... If there really was war, I had to see it with my own eyes" (Felinto 100). Rísia longs to be a protagonist in this communal struggle. Lampião informs Rísia that the women of Tijucopapo are the first armed women's group they have been able to get together. Unlike countless other revolutions, where the effort and sacrifices of women have been overshadowed by their male comrades, Rísia's revolution highlights the centrality and power of women's collective effort. Rísia believes she possesses the courage to fight side by side with her mythic foremothers. They "fight for a just cause." They are fighting to defend the community's right to live in peace and with integrity.

¹⁷⁴ Chandler, *The Bandit King*, 150.

Even the sun is implicated in this revolutionary war. Such an important struggle would be incomplete without the participation of one of the most powerful ecological emblems. With her creative powers at work, Rísia is not merely a character in someone else's story. She is simultaneously a protagonist and a multi-media artist with the ability to manipulate landscapes and make revolution possible.

Motivated by the sounds of war, Rísia continues on a road where she meets a group of soldiers she identifies as the *macacos* (monkeys).¹⁷⁵ This group of armed men prohibits her passage into Tijucoapapo. It becomes clear that a revolution is indeed taking place on her invented landscape: “*Macacos*, monkeys, were what I invented in the stories I told my brothers and sisters. War-Loving *macacos* that lived in constant battle with the snakes in the jungle. My monkeys weren't bandits. My stories were stories of battles for a just cause. My monkeys were playful and fantastic” (Felinto 102). In awe of the way reality is suddenly fusing with legend, Rísia is encouraged to challenge the *macacos* by riding past them on her mare. This moment of peril confirms for Rísia that perhaps fantasies and dreams can shape art, which then can shape reality one chooses to create.

Rísia's reconfiguration of local myths stitches together two archetypal narratives of resistance and revolution. Her version of the Lampião legend gives voice to a frequently ignored dimension of the narratives that surround the figure of this ruthless bandit. Rísia urges her listeners to see a more romantic and perhaps softer version of the renowned bandit's story by employing the archetypal relationship of the outlaw and his woman. Lampião becomes the powerful, virile, and courageous figure that

¹⁷⁵ *Macacos* is a term the *cangaceiros*/bandits traditionally used to refer to soldiers derisively.

countless romantic tales over the ages have exalted. Rísia becomes his Maria Bonita: a stoic woman willing to forsake all that is familiar in order to accompany her lover on his epic journeys across several zones of the backlands.

Rísia's revision and elaboration of that myth to emphasize the archetypal relationship between the outlaw and his woman is reminiscent of how in *Corregidora* Ursa uses an archetypal (master and female slave) relationship to create her own ritualistic art, working through the past in order better live in the present. Both Jones and Felinto's fictional daughter-protagonists are committed to producing art that has a highly *performative* function in their personal lives. The way Rísia integrates the figure of Lampião into her imaginative landscape could also be read as a revision of her own real-life father. Like Lampião her father also got into trouble with the law. However, unlike the bandit, her "not father" brought the family shame instead of honor, and thus became "a reminder of all her mortifications." She recalls that, "when we had been in São Paulo for two years, papa was arrested for smuggling. Papa is a hero, too" (Felinto 76). Her memory of her father is almost overshadowed by the sarcasm with which she now regards her father. Ritualistic art lifts these daughter-artists to a new level of awareness, creates balance, fortifies communal connections, and is holistically regenerative. The reenactment of archetypal relationships in these novels illustrates the usefulness of ritualistic art in establishing umbilical links to community and achieving a more holistic vision of self-in the world.

Rísia finds popular stories in which anger and rebellion against injustices are converted into productive energies in order to bring out change. The women of Tijucopapo used their kitchen tools to defend their community and stave off attack by

Dutch soldiers. Similarly, Lampião represents courage, hope, and the ability to improvise. These are qualities that, among others, generally ensure survival. Rísia herself survives a bad fall when the macacos shoot her mare, but it is this fall that makes it possible for her to gain entry into Tijucopapo and the realm of the fantastic.

The two local legends that Rísia selects illustrate gender-specific modes that have historically been used for resistance. Women use the domestic weapons at hand, while Lampião uses artillery and other weapons closely associated with phallic symbols. Both stories also speak of the inevitability of violence in the name of defending one's territory or effecting change.

While it can be argued that *The Women of Tijucopapo* is not intrinsically a political text, it is undeniable that Felinto's protagonist is haunted by violence, poverty, and the need for revolution. The ghostly presence of revolution is clearly manifested in Rísia's artistry. In his critical description and introduction to Marcelo Ridenti's *O fantasma da revolução brasileira*, Daniel Aarão Reis briefly summarizes the zeitgeist of Brazilian guerilla fighters and leftists in the 1960s. Reis views Ridenti's text as an apt contextualization of this key moment in Brazilian history. Ridenti's book interprets notions of revolution as specters that hover and invade every crevice of Brazilian society. Reis explicates Ridenti's central argument by pointing out that every sector of society contributed to a rebellious spirit of the times and that the 1960s persuasively illustrates the pervasiveness of the Brazilian revolutionary spirit:

Camponeses sem-terra promoviam invasões em nome de uma Reforma Agrária que viria “na lei ou na marra.” Os trabalhadores urbano paravam as fábricas e os meios de transporte, agitavam as cidades e as ruas com repetidas greves. Os estudantes participavam em campanhas de alfabetização utilizando métodos inovadores que propunham a “conscientização” dos pobres e dos deserdados

deste mundo...Até os militares subalternos, normalmente subordinados, erguiam fuzis ameaçadores, exigindo reconhecimento e participação. Um redemoinho agitava o tempo, impelindo as consciências e tomando forma artística na música, no teatro, no cinema e nas artes plásticas. A palavra “revolução” parecia ter uma capacidade mágica. Despertava consciências, mobilizava vontades.¹⁷⁶

The landless peasants promoted intrusions, encroachments, and invasions in the name of Agrarian Reform that would come “willingly or unwillingly.” The urban workers immobilized factories and transportation systems, they agitated in the cities and the streets with repeated strikes. The students participated in literacy campaigns using innovative methods that proposed “raising awareness” among the poor and the wretched of this world... Even marginalized military officers, often in subordinate positions, raised their threatening weapons, demanding recognition and participation. A whirlpool spiraled through society at that moment, driving awareness and manifesting itself in artistic forms such as in music, theatre, film, and the plastic arts. The word revolution seemed, at the time, to have acquired a magical ability. It awakened awareness and mobilized the people’s will.

No matter the social class to which the individual belonged, everyone in Brazil of the 1960s wanted to participate in bringing about change in the direction of the country. The political left often made use of its talents and preferred forms of artistic expression to spread revolution-fever. Since ultimately the force of this social mobilization was neutralized by the cooptation of this idea by conservative leaders and military men, Brazilians tend to resuscitate this revolutionary energy over and over again in times of extreme political repression. As Ridenti aptly notes, the word “revolution” appears to have a magical abilities, often manifested through artistic modes of expression during times of change.

Therefore, through the ritualistic art of inventing a revolutionary landscape during her fantastic journey, Rísia taps into the energies of this magical word. She

¹⁷⁶ Ridenti, *O fantasma da revolução brasileira*.

revises two distinct narratives, that of the women of Tijucoapapo and that of Lampião, by adapting each and stitching them together.

Artistic improvisation in Felinto's novel is linked to the concept of female movement and mobility. While Rísia's journeying is nomadic, romantic, and given to spontaneity, it is also purposeful. Without pre-charting her pilgrimage to Tijucoapapo, Felinto's protagonist shows confidence in reaching her destination and a certainty that she will make interesting discoveries along the way. Her journey can, thus, be read as an improvised pilgrimage to the land of communal myth and imagination. Tijucoapapo is emblematic of the communal self that Rísia improvises for herself in that it superimposes personal memories onto a shared and communal landscape of Northeastern lore and myth. Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconsciousness can be applied to Rísia's relationship to the legends and traditions of her community. She artfully revises myths, archetypes, images, and verses that she has *inherited*. In his examination of archetypes in the contexts of Jung and Mircea Eliade's work, Laurence Coupe writes that for Jung,¹⁷⁷

archetypes are permanent, eternal patterns of understanding. Though unrepresentable in themselves, they are made manifest as "archetypal images." These are universal motifs that come from the "collective unconscious" and are the basic content of religions and mythologies. They emerge in individuals through dreams and visions. *The "collective unconscious" is inherited, not acquired...* The task of life is to come to terms with the contents of the individual unconscious through relating them to those of the collective¹⁷⁸

Coupe observes that Freud also refers to this notion of individuals inheriting archetypal images from previous generations. In *Totem and Taboo*, originally published in

¹⁷⁷ Coupe is drawing on Jung's *Man and His Symbols* (London and New York: Arkana, 1990), 64.

¹⁷⁸ Coupe, *Myth*, 131.

German in 1913, Freud calls this idea “ the heritage of emotion” and in his 1939 text *Moses and Monotheism* he refers to this inheritance of images as “the archaic heritage.” Drawing on her Northeastern Brazilian “heritage,” Rísia employs the images and creative elements that have long circulated the lore and landscapes of her childhood. In doing so, she deliberately and imaginatively enters into the folk stories of the Northeast and thus, places her experiences and legendary events side by side on an imagined and self-created revolutionary landscape.

Rísia habitually utilizes popular and folk forms as the basis of ritualistic art. In school, Rísia learns a popular children’s poem, “Ema Seriema,” that describes the legend of a bird born from parents of two seemingly incompatible origins (Felinto 40-43). While it is true that Rísia uses this poem to improvise her own version and put it to personal use, her choice of this *specific* poem conveys her early fascination with the concept of traumatic family genealogies. Her adaptation of the existing work presages her cooptation of Tijucopapo, Lampião, and Maria Bonita.

In order to chart her own family origins, Rísia improvised an odyssey in a self-created psychic landscape. Rísia has fashioned what she calls the landscape of a journey, a revolutionary landscape (Felinto 85). This space she conjures becomes one conducive to self-reconstitution. She becomes heir to revolutionary women and sheds the shame associated with her parental heritage. Rísia makes personal use of folk knowledge. She is deliberately working through her own unconscious issues through these myths. She is more powerful, more resilient, and more aware when she places herself into the realm of legend.

The Northeastern landscape of her hometown in Recife inspires Rísia's performances of the self. Her performances are rooted in her awareness of the power of her intentionality. When intentionality is at the core of the performance of self through the revision of folk forms and use of ritualistic art, then individuals exercise free will. They can respond to, celebrate, and integrate those communal elements they deem most beneficial to their personal wellbeing. Rísia performs all that represents "self" along her pilgrimage through the act of storytelling, composing, and drawing. Rísia repeatedly vows to honor the child inside as she employs the cordel poetic strategies of improvisation, repetition, and mythic tropes; journeys toward new identities; and invents a new family genealogy. Childhood for Rísia acts very much like a collective unconscious: "everything happened precisely in the time of a little girl. The rest of life is redundant" (Felinto 85). Rísia notes that even as an adult, issues of loss, disappointment, and anger with her parents have not all disappeared, but instead have continued to reassert themselves in her life. To exorcize these phantoms of the past, she creates imaginative landscapes.

Readers sense from the beginning of the novel that changing landscapes are important components of Felinto's narrative. Rísia greets the readers by expressing what she expects to experience by the time she reaches the end of her journey: "By the time I get there, I certainly will have seen flowers, I want to see red flowers. By the time I get there, I'll have gone by beds of flowers in the middle of the fields, and I'm going to translate this letter into English and send it... Saying 'Good-bye, mother!' 'Good-bye father!'" The epistolary form frames the novel and also signals Rísia's desire to record her experiences of her travel to the land mythic possibilities. When

Rísia says “adeus, mãe!” to her parents, she finds herself journeying deeper and deeper into the world of legends and lore. In these psychic spaces she aptly uses folk forms.

While the narrative’s broader frame is that of an epistolary, Felinto’s text, like cordel literature’s enormous versatility and thematic variety, is a mosaic of various manifestations of folk and oral forms. The novel contains poems addressed to a childhood friend, imaginary one-way telephone conversations with loved ones, psalms, prayers, children’s rhymes, and games that reveal the nature of life in the Brazilian northeast. Behind the pretext of a letter written to her mother, one finds Rísia’s imaginary and solitary pilgrimage from São Paulo and back to land of her Amazonian foremothers. This pilgrimage is narrated in an anecdotal tone. Like in other folk forms, repetition is one of the key features that link the *Women of Tijucoapapo* to the oral traditions of the Brazilian Northeast. She says that adulthood is a repetition of childhood; repetition further strengthens the connection Rísia’s art to that of cordel poets (Felinto 57, 85).

As an adult, Rísia refuses to “disrespect the little girl inside.” She honors and cherishes this little girl through the use of artistic play that involves the concept of repetition. After all, she believes that adulthood is mostly a repetition of childhood. Her ritualistic art is a vehicle through which she counters loss, betrayal, anger, pain, loneliness, and lovelessness. Rísia is a musician, composer, sculptor, cordel poet, and storyteller who fluidly uses Northeastern traditions and environment as sources of inspiration (she particularly embraces the archetypal figure of the wandering minstrel that is so deeply rooted in Northeastern collective imagination).

If “every person in the city is a lost story,” then Rísia is determined not to let her story suffer the same predictable fate (Felinto 55). In order to resist this form of death and loss, Rísia must write her journey, breathe life into her story. She informs the reader that she travels for many reasons. She travels “to see if [body] can be reborn in Tijucoapapo where mama was born” (Felinto 13). She travels to re-discover her origins, find answers to reason behind an unhappy childhood, and to re-integrate herself into a legendary history and community that her mother did not have the courage to honor.

In São Paulo, Rísia is plagued by feelings of being maladjusted to urban settings and to the dysfunctional life her family leads there. Unable to bear this situation, she writes a letter dismissing herself from her family and the people she has known in the city. She takes an imaginary journey that itself becomes an artistic expression of the restlessness she longs to appease. The novel begins with Rísia’s desire to see landscape-specific elements by the time she reaches to Tijucoapapo. In addition to spotting the red flowers she hopes to see, the sight of babassu palm trees and shacks signals that she is making progress toward a specific destination and place. The things she observes and the people with whom she interacts on the path to this improvised personal odyssey stimulate her memory. She is able to recall specific scenes from the home and school she knew as a child. These flashbacks are the raw material with which she builds an alternate memory, one that embraces legend and fantasy as personal reality.

This fictional narrative of family origins starts sounding much like the truth. The mixture of reality and fantasy are made plain when Rísia suddenly realizes that it was yesterday that she remembered that her mother was born in Tijucoapapo. Her anger

toward her mother and father is closely linked to this fabricated memory. This memory stirs in her a militant attitude, the desire to paint a revolution, and make war against social injustices more than a mere possibility. She blames her belligerent predisposition on her mother's passive and fearful character. She creates her own origin and, so, bypasses some of the traumatic histories that have made her mother the type of person she wishes had never existed:

It was Poti, the moon-town where I was born and where those crazy women like auntie, or those wretched women like mama, were born, given away on a moonlit night by my grandmother, a heavy Negress, and who would later on be women with no mother nor siblings, strays, women so without anything, women so nothing... My mother had lost all contact with the truth of herself. Mama's last native link died out with the rays of the moon on the moonlit night when she was given away. My mother has no origins; in reality, my mother doesn't exist. I don't know if my mother ever was born (Felinto 22-23).

Rísia clearly wants to discard her miserable maternal heritage in exchange for a lineage of courageous and brave women who “were not my mother.” Drawing from communal heritage and one's own personal heritage does not provide comfort, resources for healing, and resilience (Felinto 113). In order to apprehend this heritage, which is also a source of inspiration for survival, a pilgrimage becomes necessary.

Rísia makes clear the interdependence of her identity as an artist and her identity as a traveler: *I travel far away. I travel, I create stories* (Felinto 54). Traveling and story telling are both closely based on Rísia relationship with her father. In *The Women of Tijucoapapo*, creative energy feeds on the improvisational characteristic of unmapped mobility. The centerpiece of Rísia's narration of her pilgrimage is a “revolutionary landscape” that unites past political issues and current concerns, local and national, history and legend. Like cordel literature, the resulting narrative is a multimedia artistic

bricolage that reflects the syncretic nature of Brazilian culture. Rísia creates through the act of traveling. By assembling scraps of images, memories, experiences from her childhood, local stories and traditions, and paternal storytelling rituals and using them to improvise her revolution: a new family genealogy with a happy ending. Rísia's bricolage-like landscape illustrates how, in very modern contexts, folk traditions can be used to create ritualistic art that creates knowledge and makes agency and healing possible. Ritualistic art embraces and encourages the type of boundary-crossing that produces in the subject the ability to better apprehend reality and personal as well as communal heritage.

Commenting on the work of the African American assemblage artist Betye Saar, bell hooks admires the type of art that makes “border crossing a sacred yet playful ritual... The spirit of play in folk art or primitive art is so rarely talked about as ritualistic, as evoking a vision of life, an ontology, that we can use to apprehend reality”.¹⁷⁹ For hooks, Saar's work evokes such theoretical standpoints as cultural hybridity, traveling, bricolage, of moment between environments, and border crossing. Like Saar's work, Rísia's artistry celebrates those border crossings that take place in the imagination, in the mind as well as in real life through her creation of revolutionary landscapes.¹⁸⁰ Rísia essentially creates an epistolary-bricolage addressed to her parents. Although her art may be interpreted as a desperate means of fathering herself, she still turns back to her father, the storyteller. She uses his art form, based on Northeastern ecological elements, to innovate the type of ritualistic art that allows her to weave a deeply subjective and alternate history with communal overtones.

¹⁷⁹ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End, 1992), 31.

¹⁸⁰ hooks, *Black Looks*, 26.

In *The Women of Tijucopapo*, Felinto portrays the type of heroine who fosters conversations about the ritualistic nature of folk art, border crossing, and the celebration of play and the sacred. The novel illustrates how these ideas are useful tools for apprehending reality and imagining alternate futures. While readers find very few references to a paternal legacy by the end of Rísia's story, it is also clear by that point that the Amazonic women Rísia meet in Tijucopapo have empowered her to transcend painful reminiscences of the past which then enables her to configure an alternate genealogy. By encircling her and vowing to defend her, these women warriors have restored Rísia's vitality and renewed her faith in the power and provisions of community. Like a prototypical paternal figure, these guardian angels offer her protection and the renewed strength necessary to move forward and create her own "happy ending."

CONCLUSION

From Literary to Visual Articulations: The Ritualistic Art of Rosana Paulino and Kara Walker

While it is true that some children who grow up without fathers being present have become successful and emotionally healthy adults, it is also true that most of these children have grappled with the legacy of their elusive father and questioned his absence. In this dissertation, I do not address the degree of success or emotional stability achieved in the absence of father. Instead, I explore how children—particularly daughters—confront this loss. Individuals like President Obama are prime examples of the fact that success and social stability can be achieved even when a person's father was absent or was barely involved in one's upbringing.

Yet, my curiosity leads me to ask: What is it about paternal absence that motivates a desire to confront? What are the psychic conflicts that women face due to paternal absence? How do male leaders shape the subjectivity of their daughters? Three of our recent presidents (Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama) appear to have been actively involved in the lives of their daughters—how interesting it would be to glean from the memoirs of their daughters precisely how having such powerful, but attentive, fathers shaped their choices and relationships.

Scholars such as Jean Reynolds go so far as to say that understanding one's father is essential to self-knowledge. For many contemporary individuals, fathers are connected to the idea of absence, pain, and loss. As recent publications reveal, women often meditate on how paternal availability and involvement shape their lives. *The*

Unavailable Father: Seven Ways Women Can Understand, Heal, and Cope with Broken Father-Daughter Relationship (2010), *Father Loss and Its Impact* (1998), and *Fatherless Daughters: Turning the Pain of Loss into the Power of Forgiveness* (2009)¹⁸¹ are but a few examples of women using writing as a means of coming to terms with their difficult paternal stories. Taking this idea to a more fundamental level, my dissertation looks to a community—Afro-diasporic peoples—marked by a conspicuous legacy of fractured families and missing fathers and to a body of literature written by and about the community’s daughters. In the work of these black women writers, the father-daughter dyad is closely tied to a specific manifestation of paternal loss linked to histories of enslavement in the Americas. For the daughter-protagonists fathers are not simply mirrors that reflect who they ought to be or role models they must emulate. This might describe more traditional father-son relationships, but these daughters, instead, tend to view their fathers as windows, revealing information about the spaces beyond the home or a threshold to this same realm.

In these three texts, information is transmitted and shared between daughters and their fathers primarily through the act of storytelling. Through the process of storytelling, our daughter-protagonists learn how they are to be treated in their relationships and the way society ought to value them. There are also some daughters who may view their fathers more like thresholds than windows. In this case, fathers or

¹⁸¹ Sarah Rosenthal, *The Unavailable Father: Seven Ways Women Can Understand, Heal, and Cope with a Broken Father-Daughter Relationship* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010); Beth Erickson, *Father Loss and Its Impact* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 1998); Pamela Thomas, *Fatherless Daughters: Turning the Pain of Loss into the Power of Forgiveness* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009); and Monique Robinson, *Longing for Daddy: Healing from the Pain of an Absent or Emotionally Distant Father* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2004).

paternal figures mediate for their daughters the intimate space of the family and the public spaces of society.

In literary representations, fathers may assume the role of one that is worth avenging, one that protects, or one whose traces urges the recovery of his memory. Sophocles's tragedy *Electra* depicts the story of the eponymous daughter who so cherishes her father's protection that when he is murdered, she is willing to avenge his death by committing misdeeds that involve killing her own mother. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a very selfish father, Prospero, jealously guards the secret of their family's heritage from his daughter Miranda. When he is finally forced to reveal the truth, readers come to understand that although Prospero is motivated by self-interest, he does love his daughter. When fathers are missing or apathetic, their literal or virtual absence often becomes the driving force of narratives based on or told from the perspective of their daughters. Portuguese novelist Lídia Jorge offers a slightly more contemporary example of father-daughter relationships in *O Vale da Paixão/The Migrant Painter of Birds* (1998).¹⁸² In this father-quest narrative, the unnamed daughter-narrator compiles a personalized paternal history by piecing together fragmented recollections and speculations about her nomadic father. The longing with which she searches for knowledge of her father is a testimony to the love she gradually develops for his idealized image.

In Western cultures, fathers or paternal figures have also been the ones who usually give their daughters's hand in marriage. Rituals like this suggest that paternal presence in certain important moments and social milestones are important; when

¹⁸² Lídia Jorge. *O Vale da Paixão*. Lisboa: Publicações Dom Quixote, 1998.

fathers are absent at such rites, a loss is deeply felt. Daughters in the African diaspora have confronted a reality in which fathers have been a rare and sometimes elusive presence. Historical events such as the trans-Atlantic slave trade, forced migration, and slavery and its aftermaths have resulted in the representation of symbolic fathers *and* “real life” fathers. The fathers represented in the texts in this dissertation illustrate that African fathers, both symbolic and flesh and blood have frequently been unknowable and ungraspable.

The symbolic African father is connected to black fathers in the flesh and bones by the fact that both are inseparable from the notion of loss. When their fathers are absent, sons lose a role model, while daughters lose their protector, mediator, and possible predictors of their future relationships to various others (the community, local landscapes, history, local lore, science, technology, business, and so forth). Relationships with fathers teach daughters to recognize themselves through other elements that constitute their community. Because fathers act as mediators and thresholds, female subjectivity must be affected when fathers have been disappeared or are absent, inadequate, or simply emotionally unavailable. Through an examination of fictional representations of the father-daughter relationship, this dissertation has revealed the connections amongst historical, symbolic, and “real life” fathers. The common crux of these three manifestations is the notion of paternal loss; confronting a legacy of loss shapes some the choices the daughter-protagonists make and the paths they choose in order to reconcile themselves with paternal relationships. And while maternal presence is surely important, too, the ritualistic art these daughters create is explicitly driven by experiences surrounding their *fathers*. In a way, we are brought

back to the notion from the introduction that maternity can be taken for granted—that is, we know our mother is our mother. But if paternity can be in question, a daughter may always strive more to cement a relationship with her father, especially if he is but a shadowy, tenuous presence.

The Dew Breaker, *Corregidora*, and *The Women of Tijucopapo* are surely not the only texts that treat the father-daughter relationship in the context of the African diaspora, but all three narratives reveal how this social relationship is dealt with through the creation of ritualistic art and the exercise of the imagination. These works are paradigmatic of historical moments that demanded that each of the writers take a retrospective glance at the past. Key historical moments of social mobilization and change frame all three father-daughter narratives. Each features an artist-protagonist whose personal journey includes a growing awareness of how historical events shape family dynamics and thus simultaneously place pressure on paternal conduct. *The Dew Breaker* was published in 2004, the same year of the bicentennial commemoration of Haitian independence. Most Haitians at home and throughout the world took this moment to reflect on the legendary victories and the darker chapters of their tiny nation's history. Much like *The Dew Breaker*, most Haitian visual art created that year signaled a desire to recognize and reclaim the past by articulating the meaning of this moment for Haitians at home and abroad.¹⁸³

¹⁸³ See visual art pieces included in the exhibition: "Vive Haiti!: Contemporary Art of the Haitian Diaspora" presented by the the Inter-American Development Bank's (IDB) Cultural Center in commemoration of Haiti's bicentennial anniversary. Online at <http://www.iadb.org/idbamerica/index.cfm?thisid=2761>.

Corregidora was published in 1975, during a decade in which black Americans began moving beyond the shame of having ancestors who were once dehumanized during slavery. African Americans gravitated toward reclaiming, unearthing, and imaginatively recreating fictional representations of hidden chapters of their history. And *The Women of Tijucopapo* was published in 1982 as a twenty-one year dictatorship was ebbing and Brazilians were experiencing the latter phase of the transition from military rule to democracy. During this period artists, intellectuals, and most Brazilians began to shake off fear of censorship and violence, and thus participated in the development and re-emergence of a wide range of social and cultural movements.

Each chapter in this dissertation illustrates how ritualistic art is employed by a daughter-protagonist to confront difficult paternal legacies framed by dynamic historical moments. Art becomes key to comprehending the historical contexts that result in the range of distinct relationships that women may experience with their fathers. For Ka, Ursa, and Rísia, paternal stories are linked to legacies of loss that echo the communal experiences of violence, silence, rebellion, and pain in their homelands. Each daughter, at one point or another, realizes there is no way around the traumatizing secrets that haunts her family. Each acknowledges that in order to achieve self-possession, she must first bear the weight of memory by confronting experiences and stories that destabilize her current perspective and disturb her psyche.

Although in many West African societies fathers were storytellers, this tradition has scarcely survived in the Americas. These three father-quest narratives show that people can sometimes find traces of this tradition in practice in various places in the diaspora. *The Dew Breaker*, *Corregidora*, and *The Women of Tijucopapo* are

representative of a revival of the image of the African father as storyteller. These three father-quest narratives also allow each personal father-story to reveal the character of a wider, communal history. Since in the diaspora, parts of collective histories have not been officially recorded, the actual storytelling process involves piecing together fragments. Therefore, the act of remembering and commemorating collective Afro-diasporic past involves artistic forms and practices that value artifacts of every day life and represent the act of collecting (for example, performed in the creation of artistic forms such as mosaics, quilts, collages). Similarly, the creation of the folheto or cordel literature involves, as Candace Slater describes, the “‘stringing together’ of bits and pieces of dissimilar material”. The process of producing cordel literature is reminiscent of the story-quilts created by acclaimed African-American visual artist Faith Ringgold or the mixed-media assemblage pieces produced by Betye Saar. Both women pull together salvaged objects and dissimilar materials in order to share African-American history—they create a whole history from fragments. This is the tradition from which many African American writers and artists gain inspiration and tell their version of a collective story.

This impulse is not only noted in commemorative or storytelling art produced by African Americans women, but also in the artistic creation of artists across the diaspora. Speaking more specifically, two contemporary Afro-diasporic visual artists, Rosana Paulino and Kara Walker, illustrate the crafting of personal and collective histories of confrontation across visual and literary forms. It is irrelevant that these two artists articulate “diaspora” in distinct languages and from countries where African slavery

followed different trajectories. Emblematically speaking, their work is inscribed in the story of diaspora. Michael Hanchard posits that:

Embedded in the tale of the diaspora is a symbolic revolt against the nation-state, and for this reason the diaspora holds a dual significance. It suggests a transnational dimension to black identity, for if the notion of an African diaspora is anything it is a human necklace strung together by a thread known as the slave trade, a thread which made its way across a path of America with little regard for national boundaries.¹⁸⁴

Putting Paulino and Walker's work in conversation with that of Danticat, Jones, and Felinto is illuminating. While Paulino and Walker's art does not necessarily focus on fathers, their chosen techniques for addressing history do closely connect with some of the thematic concerns, images, and aspirations of the three authors analyzed in this dissertation.

When viewers contemplate Afro-Brazilian Paulino's work, it is immediately apparent that she embraces assemblage techniques. In her piece, "*Parede da Memória*" / "Wall of Memory," Paulino prints vintage-like photographs on fabric to create a collection of small picture-pillows displayed on a wall. With this wall she represents a virtual family tree that includes Brazilians of various racial heritages. This assortment of photographs suggests that an individual family may often be representative of the racial and cultural fusion that is fundamental to the definition of Brazilian national identity. The viewer sees *caboclos* (people of European and Indigenous ancestry), *mulatos* (people of European and African descent), *cafuzos* (people of African and Indigenous racial heritage), *negro africanos* (blacks), and *brancos* (whites).

¹⁸⁴ Michael Hanchard, "Identity, Meaning, and the African-American," *Social Text* 24 (1990), 31-42.

In *Corregidora*, Ursa, too, is the guardian of a family tree that is also constituted by people of various racial backgrounds. As the youngest member of the Corregidora clan, her great grandmother bequeaths to Ursa a photograph of Simon Corregidora that she may have smuggled out of Brazil. Great Gram claims the photograph will help Ursa recognize evil—it will help her remember who to hate. Yet, with Ursa’s description of the image captured in the photograph, the reader begins to imagine a virtual family tree that includes individuals representing a range of racial and phenotypic combinations. Great Gram was as dark as coffee beans; Grandmama, Mama, and Ursa are all very light skinned; and Ursa’s father and her two husbands are darker. Simon himself is described as the type of Portuguese slave-owner whose darker Iberian European features made him look indigenious.

Although we typically think of a family tree as linear, both Paulino’s “Wall of Memory” and Jones’s *Corregidora* reveal that family trees can also loop back upon themselves. The “Wall of Memory” can be interpreted as a collective history that crosses age, gender, and race, and it is bound to itself by the repetition of certain photographs. Yet it can also be noted that this visual narrative disrupts the traditional linear representation of bloodlines and family ancestry. Paulino’s use of what appear to be vintage photos evokes the idea of chronicling generations across time, yet this process catches the viewer’s attention due to its repetition of the same series of photographs. This simple pattern motivates Paulino’s viewers to question the legitimacy of this circular family tree. After just a moment of viewing the “Wall,” it becomes disconcerting. The viewers begin to discover that Paulino is representing the

images that constitute the “Wall,” but also missing information. Paulino includes that family history which we do not see, but *sense*.

This awareness of missing information through the use of repetition is also found in Jones’s *Corregidora*. However, in Felinto’s novel it is not images that are repeated, but the family story. As I highlighted in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, Ursa realizes that her family’s compulsive repetition serves as a means of substituting missing information. As Great Gram sat in the rocker with little Ursa on her lap, she would repeat the words of her story “as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than the memory.”¹⁸⁵ Repetition in the *Corregidora* story has the power to surpass and become *more* than memory, more than whatever piece of the information that Great Gram chooses to reveal to the young Ursa. I would like to suggest that in Paulino’s commemorative and genealogical piece, repetition is operating as a substitution for photographs that were never taken, but still belong in this configuration of family and communal origins. Instead of simply leaving a space blank, Paulino—like Great Gram when she transmits the family story—fills the blank spaces with the information at hand.

In all three father-quest narratives, the need for repetition stems from a gap or a loss. All three daughter-protagonists express a deep sense of paternal loss. Each tries to confront the pain that accompanies their exploration of their paternal heritage. As was shown in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, Ursa, who lost a sense of belonging when her father left her and her mother, uses music to create a sense of community with her audience.

¹⁸⁵ Jones, *Corregidora*, 11.

Like Ursa, Ka finds also confronts loss. In this context, however, it is the revelation of her father's secret past that takes away the man she recognizes and knows to be her father. But before his confession, Ka already knew there was more to her father. As I have highlighted previously, Ka fashioned a wooden sculpture as a means of reaching out for the information that she *senses* is there, but is kept out of her reach. The father-sculpture is a substitution for the information that she *suspects* is missing. Ka must reconcile the figure she has sculpted with the father in the flesh and blood—a man she is only just beginning to understand.

Similarly, Rísia wants to improvise an alternate family story that involves the interplay between symbolic figures and her actual family members. In her version of family, an ensemble of legendary figures surround Rísia providing the comfort she has long craved. Rísia populates this imaginative landscape with people and ecological elements that invoke local traditions and communal lore.

The yearning to connect with some type of supportive community is especially strong in Rísia's narrative, but each of the three daughters deliberately utilizes some artistic form in order to build a sense of community and begin to create memory. The fact that the memory they create may not necessarily be accurate seems irrelevant. What is important is fulfilling this essential desire to establish some sense of belonging through the construction of memory. The need to build memory conjures, once again, one of Danticat's stories in *The Dew Breaker* as well as Paulino's "Wall of Memory."

The desire to build memory is perhaps clearest in "Seven," the second story in *The Dew Breaker*. In this story, the husband fills a wall in his small apartment with pictures that his wife sends from Haiti. As I have argued, the protagonist believes this

wall to be a means of recovering time lost between he and his wife (who is living in Haiti) while also keeping her near. It is his discomfort with the realization that he can never fully and truly recover the time they spent apart that drives his desire to create his own wall of memory.

While each daughter-protagonists may not necessarily use photographs to create and articulate their interpretations of family history, each one does use her own style and materials to share her paternal stories and express her sentiments regarding paternal loss. Like the choices these daughter-protagonists make, Paulino has a reason for choosing the type of materials she uses to create art.

With her “Wall of Memory,” Paulino mixes media to produce art that aims to recover lost stories, faces, and images that constitute marginalized Brazilian histories through the fusion of dissimilar materials that evoke ancestral cosmology and collective memory. Paulino’s art enters into conversation with an, often, obscured colonial past. “Wall of Memory,” articulates her own interpretations of that past for her viewers. Like other versions of the wall of memory created around the globe, Paulino’s “Wall of Memory,” underscores a collective history laden with loss, (in this case, loss as a result of the colonization of Indigenous populations and African bondage in Brazil).

When one views Paulino’s wall it is difficult to distinguish between imagined memory and actual personal memory. There is a strong blurring of fact and fiction. One encounters this same artistic technique in Felinto’s *The Women of Tijucoapapo*. In Chapter 3 of this dissertation, I argued that the manner in which Rísia shares the narrative of her family’s origins makes it difficult for readers to distinguish between remembered family history and fabricated genealogy. At one point in Felinto’s text,

Rísia states that it was in the humble town of Poti that her mother was born to a “heavy Negress” and then given away. Yet later in the novel, the story of her family origin is no longer set in Poti. Instead, Tijucoapapo, a place Rísia finds more glorious and palatable, stands in for Poti in the altered narrative of ancestry. It then becomes necessary for Rísia to piece together an alternate genealogy that is premised on the loss of kinship when she describes her mother’s childhood. When Rísia’s mother is given away for adoption, her mother suffered a loss of family heritage. Rísia believes that this disconnection deeply affected her mother and resulted in the type of woman her mother becomes: a pathetic, spineless adult who marries a man that mistreats her and neglects their children. From Rísia’s perspective, her mother has “lost all contact with the truth of herself [and so] in reality, my mother doesn’t exist.”¹⁸⁶ It is this painful family story that motivates Rísia’s desire to revise and create an alternate family story. Rísia uses local lore and collective history to piece together her own glorious story of origins.

As I argued previously, Rísia’s narrative of her symbolic nine-month journey to Tijucoapapo is a story of rebirth. As miserable people who were both orphans, Rísia’s parents have little idea on how to raise their precocious and observant daughter. Rísia’s imaginative journey is a confrontation of the fact that all she has to rely on are fragments of her family’s miserable narrative. Rísia uses art that is closely tied to the Northeast Brazilian landscape to reclaim a collective history as her own and forge a personal genealogy.

For most people, confrontations and explorations of a collective past can incite a certain amount of internal conflict and unease. In spite of this menace, some

¹⁸⁶ Felinto, *The Women of Tijucoapapo*, 22-23.

contemporary female artists are drawn to topics they find unspeakable, traumatic, or psychically disturbing. Paulino has expressed her preference for working with issues that are personally difficult “*Eu só trabalho com questões que me incomodam*”/ “I only work with questions that make me feel uneasy.” Her sentiment is prevalent among other Afro-diasporic female artists whose work engages traumatic and painful histories, and it lends an almost gothic or surreal dimension to their art. Some black female artists choose to deliberately treat and articulate the disturbing dimensions of unrecorded, fragmented, and liminal histories. The history of the lost African father and its corollary, the story of absent or repugnant real-life fathers, belong to this category. It is painful to remember a past that many would rather forget. This is why Paulino’s work is paradigmatic of the types of issues and techniques being used by some contemporary visual artists in the African diaspora. Here I suggest that many of these topics are also being featured in the writing of contemporary black women writers. This is made especially patent when art and artists are represented in fiction, as they are in these three novels by Danticat, Jones, and Felinto.

To underscore how contemporary Afro-diasporic writers confront emotionally difficult issues, I look now to the work of another visual artist, African American Kara Walker. Like *Ka*, *Ursa*, and *Risia*, Walker’s early artistic aspirations came out of her relationship with her father. Walker explains that “[o]ne of my earliest memories involves sitting on my dad’s lap in his studio in the garage of our house and watching

him draw. I remember thinking: ‘I want to do that, too,’ and I pretty much decided then and there at age 2½ or 3 that I was an artist just like Dad.”¹⁸⁷

Walker uses silhouettes and cut-paper art to engage with the disturbing, unspeakable, and uncomfortable histories that are part of the American imaginary. There are similarities between Kara Walker’s art and the ritualistic art created by the daughter-artist in each of the three father-quest narratives analyzed in this dissertation. In the foreword to her 2007 exhibition book, *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, Kathy Halbreich warns the audience about the disturbing nature of some of Walker’s art. Halbreich writes, “I’ve tried to convey that part of our mission as a cultural institution... is to represent many different value systems, to give space, alongside more familiar or palatable expressions, to the unfamiliar, the invisible, the unspeakable, and the contested.”¹⁸⁸ Walker uses cut-paper art to conjure ideas of loss, silence, and other sentiments that exist, but cannot be seen. Cut-paper art also emphasizes the contrasts between black and white, light and dark, and absent and present. If Paulino’s “Wall of Memory” underscores absence through repetition, Walker uses what is present to direct her viewers’s focus to what is missing. Both Paulino and Walker also use techniques that give their art a vintage feel, thus marrying contemporary and antiquated elements.

Walker’s work often depicts scenes from the pre-Civil War Southern United States landscape, and she does not shrink from some of the horrific and disturbing images that chronicle this era. Walker describes her inspiration as being based on her

¹⁸⁷ Flo Wilson, “On Walls and the Walkers,” *The International Review of African American Art* 20(3) (2006), 17-19.

¹⁸⁸ Kathy Halbreich, foreword to *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2007), 1.

own reading of and meditation on the writings of 1960s black feminists such as bell hooks, Michelle Wallace, Octavia Butler, and Toni Morrison,¹⁸⁹ each of whom has revisited the painful history of American slavery. Many of Walker's cut-paper images explicitly express this influence through their confrontation of absence and silence. The expression of loss is manifested in Walker's art through the prevalence of gaps and empty spaces, which are all apt metaphors for Afro-diasporic fragmented histories and legacies. Cut-paper art traditionally highlights the complicity of light and shadow and the collusion of black and white in an attempt to make a range of absences more palpable to viewers. Walker's use of this technique results in a disorienting and confrontational viewing experience. Commenting on Walker's ability to conjure this effect, Roderick Ferguson notes there is "a certain psychoanalytic aptitude to Walker's art, especially in its ability to force us to confront the unspeakable and scary things that haunt and motivates us."¹⁹⁰

Confrontation is also the premise of the ritualistic art that Ka, Ursa, and Rísia create. For each, the unspeakable and the scary are inextricably linked to their paternal legacies. In the fiction of Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, and other such Afro-diasporic writers, ghostly and nightmarish figures revisit the violent and gruesome chapters of black experiences and histories in the Americas. Through dreams, coincidences, and surreal scenarios, Danticat, Jones, and Felinto, too, weave into their texts moments that their readers find difficult and disturbing.

¹⁸⁹ Roderick A. Ferguson. "A Special Place within the Order of Knowledge: The Art of Kara Walker and the Conventions of African American History," *American Quarterly* 61(1) (March 2009), 185-192.

¹⁹⁰ Ferguson, "A Special Place," 190.

As I have shown in Chapter 2, Ka's wooden sculpture is inspired by the quiet, gentle father she has come to cherish and love. As soon as her father loses the sculpture and confesses his violent past, Ka is overcome by a sense of betrayal that can only be eradicated and resolved with the will to forgive. It is also her father's confession that prompts the narration of the stories of victims who suffered at the hands of her father, a "dew breaker." As Ka ponders her ancestry, readers are ushered into the lives of Haitian Americans whose lives intersect with the dew breaker and his family. These characters narrate personal stories that lament various kinds of loss through the articulation of their own unspeakable, scary experiences. In this community-centered novel, suffering and silence revolves around the loss of time, love, trust, and relationships. Just as Ka loses her trust in her father when she learns her father is a murderer, Dany of "Night Talkers" loses his innocence when he witnesses his parents being murdered (by a man he believes is Ka's father). The Bridal Seamstress shares her own nightmarish experience with the Macoutes. These grim memories are haunting nightmares that keep the past grounded in present experiences. For Ka, the disturbing takes an intimate turn when she finds out that the gentle father who has read her bedtime stories and taken her to the museum has murdered and persecuted his own people. She feels that perhaps she had always known. She muses on the fact that the scar on his face may have been communicating the truth all these years. The scar he bears signals to Ka her father's mystical connection to his victims.

In Chapter 2 of this dissertation, I illustrated just how deeply Ursa is imprisoned and haunted by her great grandfather's legacy. In a bizarre, disturbing dream, Ursa finds herself giving birth to a monstrous entity she recognizes as her great-grand father.

Paternal memory has a stranglehold on her subjectivity. Astoundingly, it is also in this unusual dreamscape that Ursa confronts her great grandfather and declares herself as a strong woman who can defend herself against the hurt and pain that has been transmitted to her in the family lore.

Entering the space of legend for Rísia is also fraught with disturbing images even in a world she is improvising. While in her actual life, her father has brought her dishonor and shame to their family due to his involvement in illegal activities, Rísia meets a courageous warrior and women who surround and protect her in her imagined landscape. The man with whom she shares an intimate moment has walked right out of 1930s Northeast Brazilian life and the women she meets “sooth[e] her with that croaking frogs’s chorus.”¹⁹¹

Kara Walker’s art has ruffled feathers due to her treatment of uncomfortable, unspeakable, taboo, and disturbing topics. She depicts nightmarish scenes of a physically violent and sexually depraved antebellum South. Black activists have long fought to dismantle degrading Jim Crow era caricatures that Walker often features in her art. Although she speaks her truth and her artistic interpretation of American slave history, Walker’s bold ability to draw on racist histories has brought opprobrium from some of her fellow visual artists as well as from a number of art critics. Their reaction is reminiscent of the way some literary critics received Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*. Walker and Jones have a way of shocking their audience and inciting a visceral reaction to make a point about a shocking history. Neither Jones nor Walker has apologized for their aesthetic stance. Walker argues passionately for the multi-vocal nature of

¹⁹¹ Felinto, *The Women of Tijucopapo*, 110.

contemporary Afro-diasporic texts. Marilene Felinto has also incited strong reactions to the themes that her work addresses. Felinto has often been accused of being a communist who must be marginalized and ridiculed due to her revolutionary ideals and her calls for sexual and racial justice. And although Danticat has earned accolades for her contributions to Afro-diasporic contemporary literature, she too has stirred discomfort in her reading audience due to her treatment of taboo topics such as suicide, maternal rape, and, in *The Dew Breaker*, the experiences of those who victimize and torment their neighbors. Addressing issues that may be unpopular, taboo, or disturbing is a central part of aesthetics and cosmovision of Danticat, Jones, Felinto, Paulino, and Walker.

Walker's silhouettes also echo the works of literature I have explored here in that they intertwine fact, fiction, and fantasy. Walker's art uses a ritualistic grammar that is premised on the idea of the collective unconscious and archetypal figures and relationships, bringing together fact and fiction. This strategy is similarly demonstrated in *Corregidora* when Ursa's first husband, Mutt, reenacts the scenario where male master auctions off his female slave. During one of her performances, Mutt transports a mostly male audience (of whom he is intensely jealous) to the slave past when he imitates the sale of a slave female by offering her to those listening to her music at Happy's nightclub. Though he may be only partly conscious of what he is doing, Mutt's actions show the power even a shameful past holds over the present. Like Jones, Walker reminds her views that the past continues to have deep implications for every day lives and social relationships. In her exploration of what she calls the "inner

plantation,” Walker, like Jones, reanimates some of the stereotypical figures that

continue to populate the psyche of contemporary America. She describes this realm as,

A place in the collective unconscious which continues to fight the Lost Cause and revel in the futility of it. This place is inhabited by familiar and forbidden ghosts acting out the debacle we call *History*. Confederate soldiers, downtrodden and defeated, mingle with tawny and seductive creole belles who arouse the suspicion if Scarlett, Fearful “free-issue niggers” stumble over little Eva, the puritanical martyr. Wicked Topsy butts a Yankee. The consumptive mistress demands satisfaction from her old Mammy.¹⁹²

Approximating the neo-slave narratives of the 1970s that had the power to virtually transport modern readers to their own personally fabricated plantations, Walker’s work is disturbingly compelling. Her silhouettes allow her viewers to revisit and dramatize scenarios from the Old South. Her archetypal figures represent the social types that inhabited American plantations life are were so deeply embedded in the collective unconscious of the American people that they have become icons of American popular culture. Perhaps what makes Walker’s ritualistic art especially unnerving it is a reminder of how easily the past can take the present hostage.

Just as Walker’s art thematically represents the Southern and slave past as a haunting figure, Danticat, Jones, and Felinto, father-quest narratives articulate, through the depiction of distinct father-daughter relationships, how relentless and insidious the past can be. Each daughter-protagonist is an artist who tailors and wields her artistic talents in an attempt to exorcise the demons of her family histories. Ka learns that her father’s haunting past as a Macoute has been unconsciously inspiring her to create a wooden sculpture of him. Her art then makes it possible for her father to disclose his past and their family’s awful connection to the Haitian American community. It is also

¹⁹² Shawn-Marie Garrett, “Return of the Repressed,” *Theater* 32(2) (Summer 2002), 26-43.

because of her art that Ka can begin to forgive her father and reconnect with the Haitian diaspora. Art in *The Dew Breaker* is healing and liberatory.

This is also demonstrated in *Corregidora* and *The Women of Tijucopapo*. The power of the imagination and the creation of art make it possible for each daughter-protagonist to confront the horrors of her past and move beyond painful paternal legacies. It is their art that empowers each daughter to become aware that the past is actively jeopardizing their sanity, happiness, and future. Through art, they realize how easily they can be ensnared by the misery, shame, and fear that envelop these difficult histories. What makes their art such a healing and liberatory act is that the imagination becomes a vehicle for establishing communal connections. These daughter-protagonists give their demons shape, expose them to light, and share them with viewers, listeners, and readers. Art—even disturbing, confrontational art—takes the power out of terrible pasts and puts it in the hands of our protagonists, instead.

It is precisely these sorts of discomfiting sensations that viewers of Kara Walker's art experience that make her craft so compelling. As Yasmil Raymond writes, viewers of Walker's art "are metaphorically and emotionally transported to the plantation of their own racial and gender prejudices, superiority and inferiority complexes, and anxieties and fetishes."¹⁹³ Walker is driven by the desire to confront and speak back to a legacy of loss and enslavement. And like the three daughter-protagonists I have discussed in this dissertation, she does so by establishing a connection between her personal memories and a collective force that denounces unsatisfactory social conditions. Ritualistic art, specifically in Afro-diasporic contexts,

¹⁹³ Yasmil Raymond, "Maladies of Power: A Kara Walker Lexicon," in *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Love* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2007), 348.

reconnects visual and kinesthetic arts to their orally transmitted and written counterparts. This is possible due to the psychic and communal work that ritualistic art performs.

Ritualistic art as discussed in this dissertation signals to a tradition of black female artistry and how it is often closely linked to the personal and social *usefulness* of artistic practices. Each of the three daughter-protagonists uses art to confront challenging paternal histories. Secrecy, rage, hysteria, and psychic bondage are some of the emotions explored through the art produced by the daughter artists of each text. The pattern of confrontation of family history through art illustrates just how deeply and passionately black women artists are connected to the dynamic and ongoing creative labor. Some black artists consider their aesthetic practices as a way to speak their truth, inspire themselves to be better people, and articulate psychically difficult and painful legacies. When Ursa is asked, “What do the blues do for you?” she replies: “They help me to explain what I can’t explain”¹⁹⁴

While on the one hand Ka, Ursa, and Rísia’s narratives show dangers might await those who decide to confront the past, on the other hand, their stories show how art can be used to tackle and make sense of personal and communal pasts. Art has subjectivity-shaping possibilities. As I have proposed in previous chapters, these daughter-artists create art that reveals, liberates, and revolutionizes their own lives and those of other members of their communities. A personalization of history incites anxieties related to power and personal rights. The three daughter-artists in this dissertation use ritualistic art to deal with the challenges they meet on their journeys to

¹⁹⁴ Jones, *Corregidora*, 56.

understanding their fathers, themselves, and their communal legacies. In the realm of visual art, one may also consider Kara Walker a daughter-artist who utilizes her silhouettes as a means of representing and reflection on the idea of absence and to understand one of many manifestations of the symbolic father, the Old South. Like Gayl Jones's *Simon Corregidora*, the Old South in Walker's art represents the cruel patriarch that continues to haunt the lives of Afro-descendants through racism and institutionalized inequalities.

Tackling the weight of traumatic personal and collective memories through orally transmitted, literary, and visual arts makes it possible to depersonalize art. Doing so may lead to the production and articulation of militantly public forms of expression that have at their epicenter a profound sense of social engagement. As daughter-artists of the African diaspora, Walker and Paulino may be said to indirectly address the absence and loss of the symbolic African father through distinctive creative media and paths that carve out space in which to acknowledge, mourn, remember, and recover from the consequences of paternal absence and forced loss.

In Danticat, Jones, and Felinto's novels, ritualistic art is used to confront loss and commemorate and revise family legacies, though imperfect they may be. By looking at themselves as part of a collective body and community, the daughter-protagonists in these three texts are able to apprehend the elements and energies they deem most valuable and sacred. Afro-diasporic women artists cultivate such imagination as a means of establishing, maintaining, and amplifying connections with family and community.

This dissertation examines the fictional father-daughter relationship as a means of contributing to literature's long-standing tradition of social engagement. We must address the destructive gender-based stereotypes that have been applied to women, but also to men. Women can help by confronting, healing, making peace, and when possible, honoring their relationship to their fathers. Commenting on David Blankenhorn *Fatherless America: Confronting our Most Urgent Social Problem* (1996), William Muehlenberg quotes anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who wrote "the father is indispensable for the full sociological status of the child as well as of its mother." Muehlenberg pinpoints this as a truth both simple and profound. The case for fatherhood needs to be revisited as part of a revamped feminist agenda.

Bell hooks declares that feminism is for everybody, and I agree. The struggle to end sexism should be premised on the desire to end *all* forms of exploitation, oppression, and injustices. Perhaps one place to begin is by exploring and revising the narratives that we, as women writers, artists, and scholars, tell about fathers and the father figures in our lives. We may make progress toward the total eradication of all forms aggression and inequality by taking note of the positive acts of fathering daughters, and promoting conversations that are more inclusive of the perspectives those fathers, brothers, uncles, and male-mentors interested in ending oppression and exploitation. Like so much else, the father-daughter dyad is socially constructed relationship; our societies and social communities have the power to change their trajectories.

In this conclusion, I have placed the work of two non-literary artists, Rosana Paulino and Kara Walker, in conversation with the work of Edwidge Danticat, Gayl

Jones, and Marilene Felinto in order to illustrate the connections amongst paternal legacies, loss, and ritualistic art within the context of Afro-diasporic cultures. As I discussed in previous chapters, I see as a common thread amongst the work of these five women cultural workers an expansion of the aesthetics of multivocality and multilocality as advocated by Zora Neale Hurston and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Both Hurston and Dunbar embraced a concept of black subjectivity that promoted diasporic conceptions of the self. This vision is highly aware and engaged with vernacular traditions and histories of peoples of African descent living beyond the geographical borders of the United States. Multivocality, as represented in the works of the five women artists discussed in this dissertation, privileges orality and conjures the often, and still, marginalized histories of peoples of African ancestry around the globe.

In this dissertation I have used an interdisciplinary approach to examine the role that ritualistic art and paternal heritage play in the development of holistic female identities. The voice of one's identity within the community continues to resonate in the histories and legacies that are transmitted from father to daughter. In this context, the paternal story serves much like a bridge in attaining the communal self, that is, the dimension of the self fashioned from values that are inextricably linked to communal and historical fragments, folkways, and vernacular forms. Unlike in conventional cultures, in most non-mainstream communities, the individual is defined within the framework of the communal. As our technologies are making it possible for our global community to become ever more interconnected and porous, I believe interdisciplinary perspectives, such as the one I use in this dissertation, liberates possibilities for a more culturally inclusive future.

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