Storytelling from the margins: the healing narratives of J. California Cooper

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STORYTELLING FROM THE MARGINS:
THE HEALING NARRATIVES OF J. CALIFORNIA COOPER

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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in

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by
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Abstract

This study examines the therapeutic qualities of selected short stories and novels of contemporary African American woman writer, J. California Cooper. Specifically, I examine the manner in which Cooper's texts can be appreciated as "healing narratives." Healing narratives, as defined in this study, are those texts in which the author consciously creates fictitious representations of reality, while employing the concept of hope as a central and guiding factor. Those aspects of the narrative that have the ability to heal or "lay hands on" a reader vary because the effectiveness of the story depends upon how well the reader can identify with the protagonist's journey toward self-actualization. In addition to illuminating the therapeutic aspects of Cooper's fiction, I also examine her use of black oral performance and storytelling.

Chapter two provides a theoretical overview of black women's healing narratives. Specifically, I examine the African American storytelling tradition and the increasing popularity of narrative therapy, including what I refer to as the "healing story." Fiction of other more popular African American women writers who have produced "healing narratives" are also highlighted. Chapter three provides a close reading of Cooper's most popular novel, Family, a "liberatory narrative" that challenges the concept of racial categories and presents enslaved black women who devised shrewd mechanisms for subverting white hegemony. In chapter four, I examine the problematic nature of African American heterosexual intimacy as presented in Cooper's first short story collection, A Piece of Mine. In chapter five, I analyze the significance of the black family as both a source of strength and adversity for black people in The Wake of the Wind, The Matter is Life, Some Love, Some Pain, Some Time, and American Book Award Winner, Homemade Love.
Chapter 1: Introduction

In his introduction to *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction*, John Edgar Wideman writes, "Our stories can place us back at the center, at the controls; they can offer alternative realities . . ." (McMillan vii). Wideman’s words can aptly be applied to the fiction of J. California Cooper and the connections her novels and short stories make to the experiences of black women. Cooper, who has often been touted as a “master storyteller,” creates narratives that not only provide deep insights into the historical and contemporary realities of black women, but also offer readers moral guidance, practical solutions, and "down home" wisdom. While her fiction reflects universal elements of the human condition, Cooper chooses to filter her rendition of such universality through the experiences of black people, especially black women.

The seeds of Cooper's future success as a writer were planted early as she claims to have had a particular fascination with paper dolls. ¹ After her mother forced her to "put her dolls away," Cooper made a transition from paper dolls to plays; plays, according to Cooper, are the natural "next step after paper dolls."² Eventually finding acclaim as a playwright, Cooper authored seventeen plays and was named Black Playwright of the Year in 1978 for *Strangers*, which was performed at the San Francisco Palace of Fine Arts. Her plays caught the attention of poet and novelist Alice Walker who encouraged her to change her plays into short stories. In 1984, Cooper’s published her first collection of short fiction, *A Piece of Mine*.

Although Cooper has been accused of creating overly preachy texts, the didactic nature of her fiction is what makes her words worth reading for much of her readership. Her most avid readers are usually not found in the halls of academia because Cooper has been relegated to the genre of popular literature. Essentially, this means that for many “educated
folk” her fiction is not comprised of enough layers of complexity to warrant scholarly study. Even the editors of the most recent edition of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* failed to include her work in the section entitled “Literature since 1975.” Certainly Cooper, a prolific playwright and author who has produced six collections of short stories, three novels, and numerous plays and who has received awards praising her literary merit (including the 1989 American Book Award), deserves some consideration within the pages of what has clearly become the most popular anthology of African American literature. One short story would have sufficed. Unfortunately, Cooper continues to remain a marginal author, even among a marginalized people.

Yet Cooper has attracted a loyal following, usually composed of working to upper middle class black women who in the past have looked forward to the publication of her novels and short story collections with great anticipation.\(^3\) Such readers crave the familiar voice she imparts to the listening/reading audience, which is one that can potentially guide readers toward those “alternative realities” to which Wideman refers. Cooper's fiction provides myriad examples of how the combined strength of optimism, diligence, and self-belief can be more powerful than adversity of any form. Most importantly, her fiction suggests that these qualities are truly accessible to black women, regardless of the realities inherent to “being bearers of a triple consciousness."\(^4\) As Calvin Hernton explains in his application and extension of DuBois’s theory of double consciousness, black women are “by being at once black, American, and female . . . victimized by the mountain of sexism, not only from the white world but from the black world as well” (205). Like the fiction of many contemporary black women writers, Cooper’s fiction confirms that the circumstances which
inform black womanhood in America are worthy of study, exploration, and, most importantly, elucidation.

My study of J. California Cooper’s fiction examines the therapeutic quality of her stories. I explore the manner in which Cooper's texts can be approached as “healing narratives,” a term introduced by Gay Wilentz’s in *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-ease*. In her book, Wilentz presents the “healing narrative” as a response to the many mental and physical illnesses that plague modern cultural communities. Her work “examines women writers from diverse ethnic backgrounds as cultural workers who aim, through their writings, to heal self and community from . . . socially constructed diseases”(3). From Wilentz’s viewpoint “socially constructed diseases” are any mental and physical illnesses that are directly related to one’s cultural background “beyond notions of diet and genes” (1). Operating from the notion that “there is a relationship between individual psychosis and ethnicity, particularly in a despised group” (1), Wilentz argues “the study of literature has always included a cathartic aspect that comes from a complete emotional identification” (17). Furthermore, in expounding upon the curative value of literature, she explains that “we can learn how something feels without actually experiencing it, and through those feelings we deal with the conflicts and problems in our own lives” (17).

Wilentz’s understanding of how literature can function in the lives of readers coincides with my own argument regarding Cooper’s fiction. Wilentz’s work focuses on the “role of women as healers in various traditional and contemporary cultures” (7), “socially constructed diseases such as nervous conditions, depression, ‘mental’ breakdowns, and the physical symptoms of those body collapses” (21), and specific curative practices as depicted in the fiction of a diverse group of women writers. My study differs from Wilentz’s in that
while I, too, am interested in “how cultures themselves can be ill” (1), I examine the social manifestation of African American cultural illness as depicted in J. California Cooper’s fiction. Furthermore, I argue that Cooper’s mission as a writer is to create functional short stories and novels that, as healing narratives, move beyond mere entertainment and are endowed with the potential to address (or perhaps dress) historically inflicted wounds of the psyche in some contemporary readers, especially black women.

Healing narratives, as defined in this study, are those texts in which the author consciously creates fictitious representations of reality while employing the concept of hope as a central and guiding factor. Often (but not always) such narratives are constructed with a first person narrator who describes the spiritual journey of a central character as she or he consciously moves from varying states of despair toward a healthier state of being. Those aspects of the narrative that have the ability to heal or “lay hands on” a reader vary, because the effectiveness of this kind of story depends upon how well the reader can identify with the protagonist and his or her journey toward personal fulfillment. In other words, the reader recognizes in the character’s background or situation a reality that is perceived to be consistent or potentially consistent with his or her own. The writing often contains minimal complex sentence structures or complicated narrative techniques, thus making the ideas, events, and language presented readily accessible to most readers. Most importantly, a healing narrative always concludes in optimism.

Healing narratives abound in contemporary African American fiction, especially in the writing of black women. For example, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* has been referred to as novel of redemption. In addition to highlighting the issues inherent to life as an early twentieth century southern black woman, Walker's narrative showcases step by step how
Celie, the central character, moves from an abject state of ignorance and self-deprecation to a state of self-appreciation and autonomy. In other words, by the end of the novel, Celie finds a road to self-healing. Celie’s revelations regarding her place in the universe challenge rigid structures of religion, gender roles, and race. In witnessing her triumph over such hegemonic structures, the reader is constrained, through sympathy and often empathy, to deeply ponder the validity of Celie’s predicament and her choice to transcend it.

Like Alice Walker, literary “greats” Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall have been recognized as prolific writers and their works have been canonized. When reading their fiction, one quality that enriches the experience is the instructive nature of their narratives. In addition to providing insight into modern day realities, these works often guide readers to a distant past in order to help them understand the beliefs or behavior of a central black character. For instance, few readers, regardless of background, can walk away from Morrison’s *Beloved* without gaining a deeper understanding of the psychological plight of formally enslaved black women and men and the strength it must have taken to survive the memory of a horrific past. Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* presents the brilliant story of Avey Johnson’s movement toward accepting and embracing her valuable African and African American cultural memory in spite of having gained easier access to the economic and social advancements of mainstream American society. These works successfully reflect what Morrison cites as the reason human beings enjoy fiction: “People want to hear a story. They love it! That’s the way they learn things. That’s the way human beings organize their human knowledge—fairy tales, myths. All narration” (Bakeman 58).

More recent, noncanonical literature from Tina McElroy Ansa, Terry McMillan, Bebe Moore Campbell, Pearl Cleage and many other contemporary black women authors of healing
narratives are often relegated to the realm of popular literature. Perhaps the optimism and “happy endings” that are common to these authors' works seem too trite for academia. Regardless of their popularity among black women readers, these authors are rarely, if ever, included in the syllabi of current American literature courses. It could be argued however, that Ansa’s *You Know Better*, McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale*, Campbell’s *Brothers and Sisters*, and Cleage's *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* are no less thought-provoking to what Calvin Hernton refers to as “popular female writer’s audiences” than Walker’s *The Color Purple* has been in academic circles. While Cooper has not received the kind of scholarly attention that some of her canonized contemporaries have garnered, her fiction consistently retains its value for many black women and is increasingly gaining the attention of African American literary scholars such as Angelyn Mitchell and Trudier Harris, both of whom have devoted short chapters in their recent works of criticism to Cooper’s novel, *Family*. Surely this is a good sign.

Other lesser known critics and book reviewers have discovered reasons to value Cooper’s work, also. She has been praised for her clever employment of plot and characterization, her “aesthetic use of black folk-narrative” and “her convincing portraits of the shared elements of the human condition.” Those persons looking for an entertaining escape from reality or an opportunity to view a black woman’s perspective on African American history and culture will find a valuable resource in Cooper’s fiction. Yet the most remarkable quality of her writing is not only its black southern “folksy” quality, but also the way in which Cooper presents her readers with opportunities for deepening their understanding of themselves—their history, inclinations, and behavior—possibly changing their perspective about their own lives. As Terry McMillan has observed, Cooper’s narratives
are “In their own gossipy, circuitous, roundabout way, the stories [that] enchant you because they are not stories; they are the truth reconstructed . . .” 6 As tall an order as this may seem, it is a possibility when the reader brings to the text an intimate knowledge of the context that informs the world of central characters. Through such perceived recognition the reader can embrace the text as a tool for empowerment and healing.

As indicated above, most of the examinations of Cooper’s fiction focus on her popular first novel, Family. My study extends and expands upon such discussions of her fiction by examining both Family and The Wake of the Wind and four collections of short stories, A Piece of Mine; Homemade Love; Some Love, Some Pain, Sometime; and The Matter Is Life. I provide a deeper examination of Cooper’s works that can be utilized and built upon by future examiners of her fiction. My ultimate goal, however, is to interest readers in moving beyond the long celebrated works of more prominent contemporary African American women writers and into the works of other less appreciated authors.

Since Cooper’s fiction has not been widely examined, much of my study entails close readings. The majority of her works focus on the lives of African American women; thus great emphasis is given to black feminist criticism, its role in the development of her female and male characters, and Cooper’s attempts to extend and sometimes amend the ideas such criticism promotes. While I also examine how Cooper employs the art of black oral performance and utilizes many aspects of the black oral tradition, the largest portion of my study provides an extended discussion of the endearing messages readers derive from much of her work. Such messages are Cooper’s attempts at reaching out to her readers to facilitate healing.
In chapter 3, I examine Cooper’s *Family* as a “liberatory narrative”[7] that explores the false nature of racial categories and highlights the journey of black women during slavery who were constrained to develop strategies for survival in the midst of some the most flagrant examples white domination. In chapter 4, I examine several black women protagonists and their struggles to obtain true peace and real love through heterosexual intimacy in Cooper’s first short story collection, *A Piece of Mine*. Finally, in chapter 5, I analyze the significance of the black family as both a source of strength and adversity for black people in *The Wake of the Wind, The Matter Is Life, Some Love, Some Pain, Sometime*, and American Book Award winner, *Homemade Love*.

**Endnotes**


2 For more on Cooper’s background see Lee E. Meadows, interview, WPON’s “Book Beat” Radio Program 1/18/99.

3 In various magazines that maintain a majority black readership, Cooper’s fiction is often selected for a top ten position in their bestseller lists. Two good examples are *Essence* and *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 26. (Winter, 1999-2000) 122-123.


5 Keith Lawrence, “J. California Cooper,” in *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*, edited by Kevin S. Hile (Detroit: Gale, 1994) 23.


7 The full meaning of this term, coined by Angelyn Mitchell, will be further expounded upon in chapter 3.
Chapter 2: A Theoretical Overview of Black Women’s Healing Narratives

The African American Storytelling Tradition – Theory and Practice

It is the story . . . that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us. –Chinua Achebe, Anthills of the Savannah (1987)

The act of storytelling can both create and dispel the wonders and mysteries of life. Long before the advent of the handwritten story or the printing press, world cultures revered the spoken word or “performed” story as the most powerful method for the transmission of ideas. The storyteller, that special individual who was heralded as the keeper of cultural memories, usually held a prominent societal position. The Native American Shamans, for instance, were storehouses of their culture’s accumulated knowledge. These masters of words could weave together stories that brought wisdom, history, and cultural mores to the listening audience. The stories told, as suggested by Chinua Achebe in the above epigraph, directed the listeners in an attempt to prevent humanity’s greatest tendency—to err.

Much like weavers of stories from other cultures, West African griots created myths and reproduced cultural memories that served to entertain, teach, and fortify listeners. According to Thomas Hale in Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music, the griot historically functions, among other roles, as a genealogist, teacher, and historian. When the African griot recounts the cultural history of his or her listeners through dance, story, or song “the individual who hears . . . is transformed from a member of the audience to the living product of those who went before” (19). The listeners are part of a living lineage that forces them to monitor their personal behavior in order to honor the ancestral memory. Depending on the event or circumstances surrounding the performance, the listener/audience can be
empowered by what is heard. Thus, the performance can move beyond mere entertainment and become a mechanism for linking the past with the present, with the intention of establishing ties to the future. Such insistence on maintaining African cultural continuity can explain the continued existence of the black oral tradition in the African diaspora. Although storytelling can be loosely defined as the presentation of an event or series of events through verbal performance, in the black oral tradition such a loose definition cannot begin to encompass the role of the storyteller or the stories told.

It has been well established that Africans brought with them to the New World a host of cultural traditions that have survived for several centuries across geographical, class, and educational divisions. Many African Americanists agree that the systematic holocaust that was American Slavery did not successfully destroy the cultural foundations embedded in the ancestral memory of enslaved Africans. Henry Louis Gates, for example, explains that “Africans brought with them [from Africa] their metaphysical systems, their languages, their terms for order, their expressive cultural practices which even the horrendous Middle Passage and the brutality of everyday life on the plantation could not effectively obliterate”(16). Houston Baker notes that “African captives could transport only certain parts of their traditional culture: customs, mores, and the deep expressive components that provide the springs of creative genius” (2). Noted linguist and expert on black modes of discourse, Geneva Smitherman, further expounds upon this idea by explaining:

the [black] oral tradition . . . is part of the cultural baggage the African brought to America. The pre-slavery background was one in which the concept of Nommo, the magic power of the Word, was believed necessary to actualize life and give man mastery over things. . . . Even though blacks have embraced English as their native tongue, still the African cultural set persists, that is the predisposition to imbue the English word with the same sense of value and commitment . . . accorded to Nommo in African culture. Hence Afro-
America’s emphasis on orality and belief in the power of the rap which has produced a style and idiom totally unlike that of whites, while paradoxically employing White English words. (78-79)

These scholars affirm the widely held belief that although the forced migration of Africans to America, coupled with the intentional destruction of their many linguistic and cultural ties to the African homeland, did necessitate the acquisition of the English language, use of that language did not mean a total loss of African epistemological ways of being. Such abstract elements of humanity are not bound to any language, but are instead expressed through it. It is reasonable, then, to presume that there can be several cultural nuances found in the artistic expressions of blacks in America that are in many ways linked to an African ancestral past. This is not to say that there is one monolithic “black way” of writing, speaking, or being. In the contemporary world, where those in power are no longer legally allowed to overtly segregate black people from others, it is difficult to find a situation where all black people share an identical experience. The days of blacks being forced to ride in the colored car or leave school at an early age to pick cotton in the Jim Crow South are no more. What is certain, however, is that many black speech patterns, formed in slavery and refined in freedom, have remained intact. Even those blacks who manage to scale the tall walls that enclose middle and upper class American society often retain what Smitherman designates as “the language of Black America,” though they are usually quite choosy about the company they select as an audience for it.

Black language then, especially in its orality, contains the power to unify because it is one of the few mechanisms that most black people can share and embrace. It has survived the many triumphs and tragedies of the black experience in America. More importantly, it has been the oral mechanism by which several generations of black people have learned,
firsthand, about the experiences of their fore parents. If the African griot is the “keeper of the culture,” so too are those generations of black grandmothers who still tell their stories on southern porches, around urban kitchen tables, or as an integral part of black family reunions throughout America. If the “word” (as explained in the concept of Nommo) holds within it both the power to create and to destroy in traditional African culture, then the word still holds this same power throughout the African diaspora.

In America, one of the most prevalent indications of the continuation of a traditional African emphasis on orality and “word power” is found in the African American storytelling tradition. Black storytellers continue to share stories containing myriad amounts of wisdom that assist in the day-to-day tasks of living for black people. Dr. David Anderson, author, educator and professional storyteller whose performance name is Sankofa, explains African American storytelling in similar terms:

Blackstorytelling (one word) is that body of traditional stories, and stories new as today, that informs and energizes the African American struggle to preserve and perpetuate the humanity of African American people. Blackstorytelling (one word) is an emerging concept, a tool for those who wish to both critique and praise African American culture (qtd. in Sobol 184). [italics mine]

Anderson's repetitive use of the phrase "one word" suggests that he fundamentally believes the concept of black storytelling to be an entity in and of itself that is separate from the storytelling practices of other regional, racial, and national groups. Furthermore, his definition infuses the act of storytelling and the story itself with the power to affect black culture and black people through both “critique” and “praise.” In other words, “blackstorytelling” not only reflects the experiences, past and present, of the black community, but it also can create change by influencing the heart, mind, and/or behavior of
the listener/reader. Certainly this is what Anderson means when he states that “blackstorytelling” has the ability to “preserve” and “perpetuate” black humanity.

While many critics would not propose such a discrete theory on black storytelling or on the African American oral tradition, Anderson’s position should not be discarded as the essentialist ravings of a black nationalist. In fact, one could argue that Anderson echoes other more prominent scholars of black life and culture who have written many well-known critical texts that explore the aesthetic expressions of black people. These authors submit that such expressions were created as an attempt to counter the majority belief that Africans and their descendants are an inferior species and therefore lack the essentials of humanity shared by other races, especially Europeans. Henry Louis Gates, for example, in discussing the presence of texts written by blacks in early eighteenth century America, explains that:

The production of literature was taken to be the central arena in which persons of African descent could, or could not, establish and redefine their status within the human community. . . . At least since 1600, Europeans had wondered aloud whether or not the African “species of men,” as they most commonly put it, could ever create formal literature . . . . If they could, then, the argument ran, the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related. (129)

Although Gates is making specific reference to the production of the written word, rather than the more oral varieties of cultural expression, his ideas still address the reality that Africans born in America have had to find ways by which they could “preserve and perpetuate” their humanity in a disbelieving and hostile land.

Unfortunately, just as there is no definitive theory on storytelling in general, there is also very little information available on African American storytelling. Very few critical works even examine its continued existence in contemporary America. Most contemporary critical examinations of the history or function of black stories or black storytelling are found
in anthologies. For example, Linda Goss’ and Marian Barnes’ Talk that Talk: An Anthology of African-American Storytelling presents a large collection of black stories that are grouped under specific thematic categories. Jump Up and Say: A Collection of Black Storytelling, also edited by Linda Goss along with Alan Goss, is a collection of stories, praisesongs, and poems that were created by both Africans and African Americans.

Alan Dundes’s Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel, an anthology that explores the folklore and verbal arts of African Americans through critical essays, is a fairly in-depth study of African American storytelling traditions. Similar to Goss’s collections, each essay is grouped under a thematic category that highlights some aspect of African American verbal expression. Although there is only one section that is devoted solely to black storytelling of folklore, it is important to note that each of the eight essays presented here foregrounds the notion that black stories contain within them a storehouse of ideas that inform the cultural values of black people. Furthermore, as Kathyrn Morgan asserts in her essay “Caddy Buffers: Legends of a Middle-Class Black Family in Philadelphia,” the telling and re-telling of black narratives can be used as a tool for individual and cultural edification in the black community (Talk that Talk 295-298).

The critical sections of Toni Cade Bambara’s now out-of-print Tales and Stories for Black Folks are just as valid as any of the few other critical discussions available on the purpose and function of black storytelling. The text is broken up into two sections. The first portion of commentary, entitled “Our Great Kitchen Tradition,” explains why it is important for black people to continue the tradition of telling stories to each other. As Bambara asserts, “. . .while it is very, very important for young folks to read, to read well, to read everything in sight, it is equally important for young folks to learn how to listen, to be proud of our oral
tradition, our elders who tell their tales in the kitchen. For they are truth” (12). This
commentary is followed by several stories that are written about and, according to Bambara,
specifically for black people. The second and final bit of commentary Bambara provides is
entitled “Rapping about Story Forms.” Here Bambara provides an explanation for the
evolution of the black story form, beginning with West African animal tales. This
commentary is followed by what Bambara refers to as “new versions of old tales” (124).
These stories are animal tales and “children’s stories” that most would consider to be parables
about the ways of humanity in general, but that contain a decidedly “black flavor” due to the
contexts and language used.

Some authors included in this collection are Ernest Gaines, Alice Walker, Langston
Hughes and, of course, Bambara herself. One might argue that, with the exception of Hughes,
many of the selected authors would not agree that their stories are specifically directed at
black folks. In fact, since 1971 when this collection was published, many of these authors,
especially Walker and Gaines, have gone on to achieve great literary fame. It is possible that
these popular authors would denounce such a seemingly essentialist and separatist assertion
that their tales and stories are “for Black Folks.” But Bambara obviously chose these stories
because she felt that they somehow address issues that pertain specifically to black people and
because they invoke for the reader “The Great Kitchen Tradition” that has edified and
sustained many African American generations. Bambara believes that the stories inherent to
this tradition are both nourishing and necessary for promoting black racial health. Since this
anthology was conceived during a time when the Black Arts and Black Power movements
were coming to a close, it is possible that one of Bambara’s missions in editing this text was
to keep alive the ideas inherent to these movements. The idea that black culture, in all forms,
is a beautiful thing to behold, to discuss, to maintain, and, certainly, to honor soon began to
decline in the latter portion of the 1970’s. With the exception of the developing presence of
black women writers, it nearly found its demise during the 1980’s. Therefore, in the present
era of multiculturalism and anti-essentialist convictions, authors are less apt to publicly
proclaim that their literary works are “for Black folks,” especially if they are attempting to
achieve a success akin to that reached by the likes of once little known authors, Alice Walker
and Ernest Gaines. However, it is important to remember that not long ago it was popular to
celebrate the ways of black folks, and write about them too.

The Healing Story

Problems entrench you with pain, while stories allow for possibilities.
--Diana Shulman

In the above epigraph, Diana Shulman, a practicing therapist, explains why narrative
therapy is such a powerful tool for healing in her practice. She finds that “one of the biggest
struggles in practicing therapy was being sucked into the pain of all problems” (xii). Viewing
her clients as stories rather than as problems allows her to externalize their issues rather than
be crippled by them. More importantly, the embracing of this alternative viewpoint has the
same affect on her clients. Both she and her clients find a way to view the pain and its causes
as problems that are meant to be solved rather than as experiences that are allowed to continue
producing pre-determined outcomes. “Each story,” explains Shulman, “is like a mystery, and
my job is to help define the plot and counterplot. The client then is allowed to choose which
is preferred” (xii).

This idea of personal choice is central to many discussions on the benefits of narrative
therapy. The use of narrative or personal storytelling has gained popularity among American
psychologists and therapists. The general belief is that there is great personal power to be gained when a patient is given the opportunity to tell and work through his or her own story. Personal story sharing allows the client to expose his or her pain, allows both the self and others the opportunity to analyze the origins and dimensions of that pain, and opens the pathway to personal healing. Such healing, if successful, can have a tremendous impact on the lives of present and future family members. The mere act of confronting and destroying the demons that so often afflict human beings can prevent those same demons from wreaking havoc on future generations. But pain is only one thing that surfaces through narrative therapy. Remembered joys, love, and good times are allowed to manifest also. Thus, working through one’s experiences can generate creativity and individual expression, which are vital components of a healthy identity. In short, effective narrative therapy not only assists in healing the fragile human psyche, but it also provides tools for living. As Shulman declares, “. . . when one gets the chance to reflect on one’s own life, choices multiply, instilling excitement at the realization that the preferred outcomes are within one’s grasp” (xiii).

Although narrative therapy as practiced often relies heavily on the client’s ability to create and explore his or her own personal stories, the use of stories external to the self also has great therapeutic worth as they can be quite powerful in effecting healing. According to Erica Helm Meade, professional storyteller, therapist, and author of *Tell it By Heart: Women and the Healing Power of Story*, healing stories possess thirteen distinct properties that make them effective in treating the illnesses of the human psyche. Of the thirteen presented and defined, the following eight functions of the healing story are the most applicable for delineating the ideas of my study:
1. Arouses strong emotions in the reader/listener.
2. Presents people, situations, and actions that the reader/listener can identify with.
3. Helps the reader/listener to externalize a conflict.
4. Helps the reader/listener activate long-term memory.
5. Teaches the reader/listener to trust emotions.
6. Provides an opportunity for the reader/listener to draw healing by internalizing wise, helpful, or comforting figures in the story.
7. Provides an opportunity for the reader/listener to model alternative attitudes and stances found within the story that can help when one is coping with hardship and trying to forge new paths.
8. Helps people come to terms with duality, ambivalence, and strife, to move toward a more philosophical perspective on life. (243-247)

To explain how the healing story works in her practice, Meade presents the story of a female client who had been suffering from depression for many years. The depression, a direct result of having endured a childhood tainted with episodes of sexual abuse and parental neglect, had steered her toward impotent remedies such as acupuncture, mood altering special lamps, and anti-depressant drugs and herbs, none of which provided her with the emotional relief that she sought. Meade’s client was able to find a healing balm for her psyche through reading, analyzing, and internalizing the lessons to be learned from the Greek mythological story of Demeter and Kore.

It is important to note here that one of the reasons that the client is so able to benefit from this particular healing story is that her father is an American of Greek origin. As a result, she has what Meade refers to as a “love-hate relationship” with Greek myths. According to Meade, “Greek myths mirrored her [the client’s] own world view. As she puts it, ‘Males have freedom and females pay the price’” (243). Perhaps there are several stories from other cultures that could have provided the client with a similar insight into her own problems that she found within this Greek myth, but Meade makes a point of highlighting the fact that it is this particular myth that eventually saves her client. The client’s American
cultural background may overshadow any clear link she has to the culture of Greek antiquity, but she is still drawn to this myth because she embraces what she presumes to be a cultural connection with the characters within it. In others words, a Native American or African myth may not have the same effect on the client because such stories are not a part of her perceived cultural background. Such identification, as noted earlier, is the second healing power of story.

The Greek American client’s ability to glean a lesson and eventually find healing from the Greek myth of Demeter and Kore is a clear example of both the healing power of story and how personal identification with the characters and/or cultural context of a selected story can be quite powerful. Identification, it seems, is one of the central factors to how a healing story functions and it is a quality that the reader/listener must bring to the story. The reader who approaches a story that she cannot personally identify with may be entertained or informed, but application of a learned lesson is another story (no pun intended). The reader must be able to see herself in the story or somehow feel that she is connected (however remotely) to a character and/or a situation.

Examinations of the power of story are also included in Shari Stone-Meditore’s *Reading Across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance*. In this text, Stone-Meditore posits that the popular post-structuralist tendency to negate the existential validity of the working relationship between truth and story has hindered contemporary society’s ability to value the power of stories as a medium for political action and resistance. While utilizing the work of political activist Hannah Arendt, and expanding on transnational feminist theory, Stone-Meditore asserts that “a story’s contribution to our understanding of the qualitative content of a phenomenon [is] the production of a *story image*: story because it is not reducible
to the narrative text but is realized as meaningful content as it is interpreted by specific communities and *image* because, like a visual image, it consists of an array of related qualities” (34, italics not mine). She goes on to explain that “image... refer[s]to the collection of moral, affective, and aesthetic qualities that a story helps readers to imagine in connection with a particular phenomenon” (34-35). Such images, when “transmitted through a community’s narratives and thus . . . conditioned by that community’s language . . . have their full force only for those who are familiar with that language and culture (Stone-Mediatore 36). Stone-Mediatore’s idea that the *full force* or, as I would state it, overall significance of a story can most fully be understood by those who hail from the community and/or culture out of which the language originates is without doubt a controversial concept. However, this idea complements my own belief in the healing possibilities of narrative and storytelling. Mediatore-Stone sees the act of storytelling as a powerful mechanism for galvanizing collective political action among a people. My concern differs from hers only in that I am more interested in how storytelling can facilitate the healing of the reader’s psyche, as I believe such healing to be a necessity before any successful political movement can take place.

**Naming Our Pain, Healing Our Wounds: Healing Narratives in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction**

Like all mental health disorders, the wounded African American psyche must be attended to . . .

--bell hooks, *Killing Rage*

bell hooks comments on the traditional psychological coping methods of African Americans in their search to find peace. In short, she finds that this group does not effectively address the damaged psyches that run rampant in the African American community. The
suggestion is that the traditional method of tending to psychological wounds that continue to inform the behavior and coping mechanisms of not only individuals but whole communities is to simply ignore the pain and concentrate on proving that African Americans have risen above the atrocities perpetrated upon them by various European and American institutions. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, African American writers such as Booker T. Washington, Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois sought to prove that black folks were both resilient and brilliant, thus deserving of equal status in society. As hooks explains, “they cited their lives and work as evidence that we [Blacks] were not only equal to White people but perhaps superior because so many of us managed to start from nothing and invent powerful creative selves” (Killing Rage 133). She asserts that while heralding black accomplishments can be beneficial for temporarily boosting self-esteem, it is simply not enough to counteract effectively the historical baggage of institutionalized racism. Something more is necessary to heal these wounds.

According to hooks,

Collective failure to address adequately the psychic wounds inflicted by racist aggression is the breeding ground for a psychology of victimhood wherein learned helplessness, uncontrollable rage, and/or feelings of overwhelming powerlessness and despair abound in the psyches of black folks, yet are not attended to in ways that empower and promote holistic states of well-being. (Killing Rage 137)

Hooks’s assessment of contemporary black ways of being nearly echoes the views of a certain conservative faction among African Americans which maintains that black people are much too comfortable reveling within a perpetual state of victimhood. One only needs to remember the popularity of John McWhorter’s Losing the Race, the controversy surrounding Clarence Thomas’ ascent to the Supreme Court, or Ward Connerly’s decision to spearhead the
movement to end affirmative action in the University of California system to understand that some black people (often black men with power) believe that the civil rights movement, although not a complete success, leveled the American playing field enough so that African Americans could succeed in obtaining the American Dream if only they would effectively apply themselves.

The difference between bell hooks’s assessment of black victimology and the views of McWhorter, Thomas, Connerly, and others with similar viewpoints is that while hooks acknowledges the destructive origins and outcomes of these tendencies, she also emphasizes the need to treat them. Yet for the more conservative African American, the only action necessary is to rise above the horrors of the past by simply proactively entering into the American competitive arena. In fact, McWhorter’s analogy for the quintessential black “victim” is “a person with his eyes sealed shut still pawing frantically after his attacker long after his attacker has laid off . . .” (213). He further argues that “the unjust fact is that once he has [laid off], he walks on unharmed, while it is up to us [black people] to stand up, rub our eyes, brush ourselves off, and walk on to do the best work and lead the best lives we can” (213). John McWhorter’s solution seems quite logical. One might even argue, in light of the growing black middle class and the ascent of a few black people to highly coveted positions in governmental offices and Fortune 500 companies, that McWhorter’s solution is even plausible. The only flaw in his solution is that in order to stand up and dust oneself off, one must be in a healthy psychological space. One must come from an environment in which the primary teachers and nurturers have already banished the destructive memories and generational tendencies that allow the seeds of black victimology to grow and blossom. Standing up and walking on can seem impossible for those who are living on the margins of
society. Furthermore, as McWhorter himself acknowledges, many middle and upper middle class blacks in America continue to live, think, and behave in ways that suggest that they are clinging to what he refers to as the “cult of victimology.” And many of those who have managed to “succeed” academically, socially, and economically may wake up one day and discover that they are living with varying levels of hatred – for themselves and others – that can manifest itself at any given moment.

While I am not refuting all of McWhorter’s many observations about black people in America (although I do take issue with more than a few), I am suggesting that treating the ills of the victim may be more successful than expecting the victim to turn a blind eye to the factors that created the “cult of victimology” in the first place. Perhaps hooks’s emphasis on healing the wounds of the black psyche, exposing the factors that continue to exacerbate them and developing ways to “empower and promote holistic states of well-being” will yield a greater harvest.

One method of addressing the needs of the black psyche is through narratives. Contemporary black women writers have been literary leaders in the effort to empower and promote holistic states of well being for black people. It is interesting to note, however, that issues that most significantly affect black womanhood have in the past been considered as inappropriate writing material for presentation to the masses. Traditionally, “exceptional” black fiction has not been composed of such themes and many attempts by black female authors to both explore and expose the issues that highlight the plight of black womanhood within and outside the black community have often been met with hostility or neglect. Some examples are the negative feedback that much of Zora Neale Hurston’s fiction received during and after the Harlem Renaissance, and the relegation to near obscurity of Ann Petry’s fiction.
Even earlier examples are Phillis Wheatley and Harriet Jacobs, both of whom suffered similar fates at the hands of their own eighteenth and nineteenth century contemporaries. The literature of these and other black female literary giants often deviated from the popular practices of their male counterparts. The complex themes and subject matter that black women writers have historically wrestled with have often times been considered unworthy of discussion. Consequently, if the very subject matter is considered to be taboo, the publishing of such material, a literal airing of the black community’s dirty laundry for the world to both see and critique, has often been considered to be unquestionably forbidden and nearly treasonous. As hooks explains,

Works like Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, as well as the more widely acclaimed *Beloved*, all address issues of psychic trauma. Significantly, many of the works by contemporary black women writers began to overtly address psychological trauma in the wake of contemporary feminist movement sanctioning the disclosure of private matters and secrets in public space. . . . Feminist focus on reproductive rights, domestic violence, rape and child abuse, particularly incest, as well as patterns of domination in sexual and intimate relations, intervened in the cultural silence that had once deemed these topics taboo (*Killing Rage* 138).

While the traditional protest literature of black men, from Frederick Douglass to Richard Wright, has served the black community well in exposing the most horrid effects of racism on both black and white Americans, it is the work of black women authors that has most effectively revealed more intimate issues within the black community. It has been black women authors who have endeavored to open a discussion on the realities of black family life and the formation of black female identity. This is not to say that black male authors have not or do not broach similar subjects in their fiction, only that black women more consistently tackle these themes. In short, the goal of many black women writers has not been the
distasteful exposure of the black community, but rather the creation of an effective platform on which to initiate and continue its healing.

**Contemporary Healing Narratives and Cooper’s Fiction**

“Contemporary Literary Renaissance” is a label Joanne Braxton has created to describe the resurgence of fiction created by black women during the last thirty years of the twentieth century. In discussing the recent surge of black women’s fiction, Braxton is careful to pay homage to earlier black women writers who paved the way for the writing of contemporary black women by struggling tirelessly to develop a voice in an oppressive society driven by racism and sexism:

> By passing along cherished recipes to subsequent generations, by testifyin’, by telling the story of their religious conversions, or by singing the spirituals or the blues, Black women helped to revise and extend [the] oral tradition. Denied access to literacy, these creative foremothers nevertheless maintained an underground railway for the survival of the spirit” (xxii).

Many contemporary writers such as Tina McElroy Ansa, Ntoshake Shange, and Terry McMillan continue this centuries old tradition of revision and extension and, as Braxton notes, are ushering in “the most extensive written exploration of that realm of shared language, reference, and allusion within the Veil of our Blackness and our femaleness . . .” (xxii). While I wholeheartedly agree with the observations of Braxton, I would like to add that these authors, as do so many other contemporary black women authors, also explore the concept of healing in their novels. Although not always made explicit throughout the text, a message that promotes the necessity of healing for black people, especially women, is often a central theme.

In an interview with Rebecca Carroll, Tina McElroy Ansa, who refers to herself as “blackfolkcentric,” explains her goals as a contemporary black woman writer:
I write contemporary fiction. It is not my aim to write pop contemporary fiction. I certainly want to tell a story, cause ain’t no use in black people writin’ if they don’t tell a story. But I do want there to be more. I’m tryin’ to write fiction here. . . . And I am very aware that my writing is a gift, a gift that I share with others. . . . I want my readers to come with something and to leave with something. I hope that I am a good storyteller so that anyone can read my work and say, “Ooh that was good, that was funny,” but I also want people to be able to dig deeper. I think of my writing as a casserole or a torte. You know, there’s a top level—and if you get just that, that would be fine, but if you bite into the whole thing then there’s all kinds of different and delicious levels underneath. (Carroll 26)

What is underneath Ansa’s fiction is, among other things, sage wisdom that brings important messages to her readers. Ansa’s preference, as demonstrated in each of her novels, is to utilize supernatural phenomenon such as ghosts and conjuring in her fiction. As Ansa explains, writing novels that foreground the supernatural helps her “to snatch back our culture; to snatch back back the part of our culture that really comes from Africanisms that tell us to respect and make reference to our ancestors, to make a connection between those who are living and those who have passed on” (Carroll 22).

In her most recent novel, *You Know Better*, Ansa presents three ghosts who return to this side of reality to assist in healing the painful lives of three black women. Eighteen-year-old LaShawndra, her mother, Sandra and her grandmother, Lily Paine Paines, each suffer from the damaging effects of a contemporary black society that seems to have gone awry, having lost, or perhaps only misplaced, the self-dignity and self respect held by past generations of black people who managed to maintain a cohesive black community. By the end of the novel it is obvious that Ansa intends to highlight the necessity of reconciliation and healing between generations of black women, for only love, wisdom and experience can save the futures of the young. However, Ansa also makes it clear that no matter what one’s age is
and no matter how much wisdom one has acquired over the years, healing the lives of others is impossible until one has exorcised the demons of the past that plague one’s own life first.

Author Terry McMillan, whose novels *Disappearing Acts* and *Waiting to Exhale* earned her such popularity that they were brought to the screens of cinemas across America in the mid-1990s, continues to create fiction that highlights the psychological needs of contemporary black women. Although many critics have relegated her fiction to the realm of pop contemporary fiction that Ansa refers to above, it is important to understand that McMillan’s fiction successfully reaches the hearts and minds of countless black women in America who have found in her work a reflection of themselves. McMillan’s novels, although not written in the eloquently complex style of a Morrison novel, nevertheless paint for the reader a vivid picture of the lives of many present-day urban middle class black women. Her fiction is not so much focused on proving the inequities between races, as it is on exposing and exploring the issues that often plague intimate relationships between black women and men.

Contemporary black authors Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor have each achieved success in both pop culture and academia. Each has written a novel that has been broadcast in movie houses around the world or became a made-for-TV movie. In other words, each author has found the necessary balance that will ensure a long productive career. Upon reading the work of these authors, most are pleased at the necessary levels of complexity that make for good fiction. In *The Color Purple, Beloved, and The Women of Brewster Place*, the novels that made them famous, it is clear that the focus is on black women, and their ability to survive and surmount life’s obstacles. But of even greater importance (especially as pertaining to my study) is that at the end of each novel the reader is
left with a sense that the female protagonists have either self-actualized or found liberation. When black women read the fiction of these authors and so many others, they are presented with more than just a well-expedited story. They are gifted with a therapeutic roadmap for healing many issues that are the residual baggage of American slavery.

**Cooper’s Healing Narratives**

Cooper’s fiction “preserves and perpetuates” African American humanity. But this can be said about a great deal of fiction created by African Americans, male and female. My study explores how Cooper uses the art of storytelling or narrative as an agent for healing by creating characters who search for and succeed at finding methods to negotiate through those factors that historically and contemporarily impact the social and psychological health of black women. Cooper’s fiction allows all readers the opportunity to obtain an intimate look at the lives of black women, past and present, through her creation of stories that explore the cultural ills of the black community. Yet because the settings of her short stories are most frequently small black southern communities and the plots of her novels and short stories usually revolve around the transformations, failures, and/or successes of black women, the black female reader is usually the audience that most effectively gleans the healing benefits of her fiction.

I am in no way suggesting that Cooper’s fiction does not possess universal appeal, or that “it’s a black thing” that non-blacks would not understand. On the contrary, the simplicity of the narrative structure in Cooper’s fiction, much like that of Langston Hughes, or even Ernest Hemingway, makes it accessible to all of her readers. In fact, I believe Cooper intends for her fiction to touch the lives of all readers. This is indicated most significantly by the dedications in her novels and short stories that so often acknowledge persons of varying
backgrounds. For example, *Homemade Love*, Cooper’s second collection of short stories, is dedicated “with love” to several persons including “all those people, through the years of this world, of all races, with love and kindness in their hearts and conscience in the minds who have helped people of their own and all other races suffering travail . . . .” *The Wake of the Wind*, Cooper’s third novel, is dedicated to “Every Black, Brown, Yellow, Red, or White person in life who tried to help any slave, particularly the African-American slave.” Most significantly, *Family*, Cooper’s first novel, is dedicated to, among many others, “THE WHOLE HUMAN FAMILY.” It is clear, therefore, that Cooper intends for her fiction to be read and understood by any reader who can readily grasp the concepts of theme, plot, and narrative structure.

However, it could be argued that Cooper also has a higher, more functional purpose for her fiction and that she intends for her work to be more than merely “understood.” She intends, as Toni Cade Bambara once said of her own fiction, “to produce stories that save our lives.”³ But in order for one’s life to be truly affected by a work of fiction, one must be able to in some way identify with its characters and the experiences of those characters. Since Cooper does not deviate very often from writing about issues that pertain to black womanhood and since both her short stories and novels are usually heavily saturated with overt didacticism, it is not a stretch to assume that a black female readership would glean the most from her fiction or that Cooper intends for her fiction to inform, affect, and initiate healing in the lives of her largest group readership, black women. By writing (telling) her stories, Cooper provides the diagnosis. Through reading (listening) to situations that both reflect their experiences and offer solutions, black women engage in therapy. The anticipated result: healing begins and lives can be saved.
Endnotes


2 Storytelling festivals are popular around the nation. Black Storytellers Alliance is a group of storytellers who provide training for those interested in using the African based storytelling methods to reach their audience. Drawing on a rich African and African American storytelling tradition, these storytelling masters perform for schools, businesses, and private functions. They are a member of the National Black Storytelling Alliance (NABS) an organization which "promotes and perpetuates the art of Black storytelling-an art form which embodies the history, heritage, and culture of African Americans" (http://www.nabsnet.org/home.html).
Chapter 3: “Living in the Light”: Combating Whiteness in J. California Cooper’s *Family*

There is that great African proverb, that until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter. Once I realized that, I had to be a writer. I had to be that historian. It’s not one man’s job. It’s not one person’s job. But it is something we have to do, so that the story of the hunt will also reflect the agony, the travail, the bravery, even, of the lions.

--Chinua Achebe, Interview in *The Paris Review*

Since the publication of Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966), several contemporary black women writers have followed suit and chosen to produce novels that are centered on the trials and triumphs of black people, especially women, during American slavery. The force behind such endeavors is reflected in Achebe’s words above and echoes W.E.B. DuBois’s intentions in writing *Black Reconstruction* (1935). As DuBois argues, “... no amount of flowery romance and personal reminiscences of its protected beneficiaries can keep the world from knowing that slavery was a cruel, dirty, costly and inexcusable anachronism, which nearly ruined the world’s greatest experiment in democracy” (715). Interestingly, one of the most popular “flowery romances” by a “protected beneficiary” appeared the following year in the form of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*. Mitchell’s 1936 novel defined the historical era of the Civil War and Reconstruction for many subsequent generations of Americans. Her arguably offensive depictions of enslaved black people supplied many mid-twentieth century filmmakers, novelists, and post card creators with myriad demeaning images that perpetuated the racist belief systems crystallized in the antebellum South. Clearly, there has been a need to ensure that all sides of the story of American slavery are revealed.
Fortunately, late twentieth century black women authors have followed in the footsteps of Margaret Walker and have created texts that problematize, if not invalidate, earlier depictions of black slaves by white authors. Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone*, Lalita Tademy’s *Cane River*, Shirley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* and, most notably, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* are novels that, in keeping with Achebe’s admonishment in the above epigraph, reflect the “agony, the travail, [and] the bravery” of the slave. Their depictions, always presented from the point of view of the “lion,” suggest that Mitchell’s narrative creations are more fantasy than reality. These black women writers have produced a more heroic representation of people who survived what can accurately be described as American terrorism.

Although the more popular term for this fairly new genre of literature is the “neo-slave narrative,” I prefer to embrace the term coined by Angelyn Mitchell, the “liberatory narrative” (xii).\(^1\) Mitchell’s decision to create a new label for such historic narratives is not a total rejection of the more familiar term. She is merely affirming that these novels are not limited to depicting the black woman’s condition as a slave. They also explore the many ways in which black women and men survived this tragic experience and how they may have achieved some level of freedom, both physical and mental. In addition, the term “neo-slave narrative” suggests that novels that are in this genre are limited to a setting in the antebellum South. Yet anyone with even the slightest knowledge about the historical relationship between blacks and whites in America knows that the problems that plagued Americans during slavery did not end with its demise. These issues have survived well into the twentieth century, and many Americans would argue that they are still prevalent today. Therefore, “liberatory narrative” is a more appropriate term for discussing novels that are set during slavery, any novel that is
reminiscent of the classic slave narrative in form, theme, and plot, and, most importantly, any novel that foregrounds the struggle of a black people to achieve liberation from an undesirable condition.

The term “liberatory narrative” is especially appropriate for my discussion of J. California Cooper’s novels because it begs the question: From what force is “liberation” necessary? I would argue that it is not only from the institution of slavery that black people have needed liberation. As observed earlier, emancipation did not yield the kind of liberation that former slaves anticipated and former slave owners feared. Booker T. Washington’s controversial observations regarding how the “system of slavery” created both black and white victims contains several strains of validity. However, most persons would agree that it was not the system of slavery that infected all persons who were touched by it. The reality is that this “peculiar institution” was created for the perpetuation of white progress and privilege; it is, therefore, from the institution of whiteness that slaves and their progeny have needed liberation.

Through my use of the term *whiteness* I do not mean to single out persons of European descent as the total sum of evil in the world. Instead, I am merely stating the obvious, which is that in the context of the historical relationship between whites and persons of color, it has been whites (especially white men) that have wielded dominion. As the concept of whiteness relates to my study of Cooper’s fiction, I broadly define it as a social system which devalues persons of African descent or any other genealogical strain that is not European, by denying them equal rights through law, social custom, economics, and many other means. The purpose of such inequitable denials invariably has been for the benefit, promotion, and/or maintenance of social and socio-economic advantage for persons of European descent. As
such, whiteness has equaled what Frederick Douglass refers to as “irresponsible power” and has quite frequently rendered its victims powerless in the interest of maintaining the status quo. In the case of chattel slavery, it attempted to strip human beings of their humanity for its own survival. When people speak of black men and women surviving American slavery, what they are essentially saying is that blacks survived one of the many systems that whiteness created. Such a system, George Lipsitz argues, mandates the perpetuation of “an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity”(vii). Jim Crow Laws, Japanese internment camps, Native American reservations, eugenics, and several other American minority oppressing systems were instituted for the maintenance of white authority and control at any cost. Therefore, survival and progress for non-whites in America, especially for persons of African descent, has always depended on how effectively they have managed to maneuver around and within a culture of white domination.

Such maneuverings are central to the novels of J. California Cooper and many other authors of liberatory narratives. *Family*, Cooper’s first novel, is set primarily during the years of slavery and concludes well into the Reconstruction years. This novel, like each of her subsequent novels, chronicles the experiences of a black family that diligently searches for methods to achieve more than the mere physical survival of slavery and its aftermath. In *Family*, Cooper’s characters actively seek an end to their misery by negotiating whiteness for their own benefit. Such negotiations entail coping with and/or navigating through white constructs for the purpose of physical survival and social and economic progress. Although their decisions do not always yield success, the fact that they are proactive about ending their plight for the sake of themselves and/or their children suggests a level of heroism that has not
often been presented in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth century Civil War and
Reconstruction novels of white authors.

J. California Cooper attempts to reexamine the plight of American slaves and their
descendants, ensuring that their perspectives are chronicled in a manner that pays tribute to
their endurance and courage by shifting the gaze from observed to observer. Most
importantly, Cooper's novels foreground all aspects of black humanity, positive and negative,
ultimately helping to shatter any remaining demoralizing and dehumanizing notions about
persons of African descent that have historically served to fuel a system of oppression,
without ignoring the flaws of black humanity. The result is a valuable contribution to the
growing collection of contemporary works by African American women that, as bell hooks
recognizes, “addresses the deep, often unnamed psychic wounding that take place in the daily
lives of black folks in this society” (Killing Rage 11). By addressing these wounds and
candidly acknowledging their origins, Cooper’s Family provides roadmaps that can
potentially assist in mending fences between blacks and whites, and heal the fragmented
psyches of black women.

In the first section of this chapter, I examine how Cooper exposes the absurdity of
racial categories in her examination of intimate relationships between blacks and whites in
antebellum America. The chapter concludes with a lengthy discussion of how Cooper utilizes
the narrative voice and characterizations of slave women and their progeny to send a much
needed lesson of healing directly into the hearts and minds of her contemporary black female
readers: the importance of actively seeking self-empowerment through the fate determining
power of choice.
“We the Human Family”: Cooper’s *Family* as a Road Map for Racial Healing

What tangled skeins are the genealogies of slavery!
--Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl*

In *Chains and Images of Psychological Slavery*, noted black psychologist Na’im Akbar analyzes the effects of slavery on contemporary African Americans. In his book he argues that several of the problems that plague many black people are actually mental and social illnesses that originated in American slavery. Akbar explains that

in order to fully grasp the magnitude of our current problems, we must reopen the books on the events of slavery. Our objective should not be to cry stale tears for the past, nor to rekindle old hatreds for past injustices. Instead, we should seek to enlighten our path of today by better understandg where and how the lights were turned out yesterday. We should also understand that slavery should be viewed as a starting point for understanding the African-American psyche, and not as an end point. (8)

Unfortunately, Akbar’s observations are often not acknowledged as popular sources for academic study. However, I agree with Akbar’s observations about the necessity for black people, in particular, to study the impact of slavery on the psychological development of persons of African descent. Yet I would also argue that it is not possible to explore this issue fully without including the white psyche in the discussion. As Clora, the “dead but not gone” narrator declares in the closing passages of *Family*, “All my family, my blood, is mixed up now. They don’t even all know each other. I just hope they don’t never hate or fight each other, not knowing who they are” (230). Here Clora questions the concept of racial designation, especially within the construct of binary opposition that the system of slavery created in America. Clora’s statement is an appeal to humanity, specifically black and white humanity, to accept and embrace their kinship. By utilizing the structure and setting of the slave narrative for her first novel, yet ending it with such an appeal, Cooper is not merely
revisiting the past through her fiction. She, like psychologist Akbar, is utilizing the past to explain, inform, and heal the present.

Cooper’s dedication page is divided into three sections. In the first and second sections, Cooper dedicates Family “with love” to her parents, her daughter, and her helper. She also presents a long list of writers, living and deceased entertainers, athletes, artists, historical figures, and other unknowns. Cooper’s third division is headlined with “With Special Love for.” The people listed in this group are not labeled by name as in previous sections but, rather, are lumped together under general categories that are representative of the ills of mankind. In this separate “special” space Cooper dedicates Family to persons who are physically, emotionally, or socially ill, ending the list with the most helpless humans—the babies. The suggestion here is that just as babies need constant help because they are the most vulnerable human beings, persons who suffer from the other ills listed are also in constant need of attention and assistance. She next creates a kind of subdivision with parentheses in which she places what appears to be a command: “Fear for the Godless, the loveless.” Although she separates these persons from the others, the fact that she ends this dedication with “THE WHOLE HUMAN FAMILY” suggests that not only does she have love even for those who are Godless and loveless, but that each member of the human family falls into one of her listed categories. In other words, all humans are ill or are suffering in some way. It is reasonable to assume then that Cooper intends her first novel to be more than a common narrative or storytelling event. This novel is an offering of healing.

Before the events of the novel begin, Cooper provides the reader with a seemingly unrelated myth that explains the introduction of humanity into the world. On the surface, the myth reads rather cryptically. Yet a close analysis will reveal how the symbolic suggestions
of this mythical prologue introduce a dominant theme within the novel—humanity’s need for racial unity. The creational myth of the Earth Goddess and Child is as follows:

AND THE EARTH MOTHER ASKED THE EARTH CHILD AS SHE HANDED IT THE SUCCULENT EARTH FRUIT, “AND WHEN DOES A TREE BEAR FRUIT THAT IS NOT ITS OWN?”


THE SUN LOOKED DOWN . . . THE MOON PEERED UP. LISTENING, MOVING ON, SAYING, “EVERYONE KNOWS THAT. THAT’S WHAT MAKES A FAMILY!”

Elizabeth Beaulieu presents a plausible theory for the inclusion of this myth (that she also applies to the novel itself) as Cooper’s method of rewriting history by “creating a new myth, a female myth, to transcend the cosmos of slavery in which she places her characters” (84-85). However, in my analysis of the novel, I lean more towards Angelyn Mitchell’s explanation that Cooper “presents the repressed ‘historiography’ of enslaved Black women” (109). She further argues, “If enslaved families were primarily matriarchal, as traditional American historiography concludes, Cooper identifies the cause as white patriarchy’s sexual abuse and exploitation of enslaved black women that perverted the institution of family for enslaved men and women, denying them opportunity for unmolested interpersonal relations” (110). The opening myth then, is not merely an attempt to rewrite the Biblical fall of man or the history of American slavery. Cooper’s myth comfortably opens a space, a woman-centered space, for the forthcoming primary text that focuses on the often ignored story of enslaved black women, who, as Mitchell points out, were central figures in the enslaved black
family. In this way, Cooper creates a friendly feminine space that introduces the distinctly matrifocal nature of the novel and reaches out to women readers who are her primary audience. But this is not the only possible purpose for the inclusion of this myth.

In the feminine space presented by the myth, there is no impending male god who threatens the destruction of human life as a consequence of eating forbidden fruit. In the Jewish-Christian Bible, Adam and Eve are forbidden to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge because “it shall surely bring them death.” But in the mythical world of the Earth Mother and Child, the act of biting into the fruit does not bring death to humanity; it brings life. The visual image that is created by the narrator’s description of the Earth Fruit’s juice flowing over the mountains of the Earth Child and “running, running . . . until all the juices flowed together again, blending, into the ocean of human life” is of blood. It is an endlessly flowing stream that has no particular destination, yet which moves with great deliberateness. This mythical running blood is dramatically refigured in the novel through the many consanguine relationships that are created by New World slavery. Cooper’s hope and suggestion for healing is found in the culminating image of the running juice flowing “. . . until all the juices flowed together again, blending, into the ocean of human life.” The image suggests a utopian society in which all human beings are cognizant and accepting of their familial connection to one another and a harmonious existence is finally (or perhaps once again) established. The concluding page of Family relates a similar image when Clora ecstatically affirms, “Cause all these people livin are brothers and sisters and cousins. All these beautiful different colors! We! . . . We the human Family. God said so! FAMILY!” (231).

The historically disturbing interpersonal relationships between human beings that racial oppression demands appears silly and unjustifiable when viewed through the lens that
Cooper creates with her myth. In a recent interview, Cooper frequently references her Jewish-Christian beliefs, especially the Ten Commandments, when explaining significant ideas in her fiction. Thus, it is possible that she believes every stream of blood that each human being carries—regardless of racial background—was created from one source. Consequently, as the myth suggests, the idea that one human being is superior or inferior to another is implausible. Cooper’s myth demands that each reader understand that everyone is part of the human family. In this way, Cooper revisits and challenges notions promoted by eighteenth century European philosophers that sought to prove the inhumanity of African people and, I would suggest, justify the perpetuation of the African slave trade. When the origins of humanity are viewed through the lens created by this seemingly strange and abstract myth, the reader is invited to ponder what the concept of humanity really means. Cooper suggests that human beings must accept that they are linked, not solely by color or culture, but more importantly by the very blood that sustains human life. Persons who are able to see beyond artificial divisions that serve to separate humanity and accept their common bond free themselves for taking the initial steps towards clearing a pathway toward healing among all racial lines. However fantastic these ideas may appear to be, several aspects of Family seem to elucidate the verity of these notions.

The emphasis on blood ties between whites and blacks, especially as they relate to miscegenation and passing, is a significant theme throughout the novel. Of greater importance, however, is Cooper’s insistence that all people are endowed with limitless opportunities to make choices in life. The circumstances into which a person is born become less significant once a person realizes that as a human being, one has the power to choose and, therefore, the power to amend one’s destiny as needed. This theme is common to all of
Cooper’s works and explains why her short stories often end optimistically and why the main characters in her novels invariably find their way to a happy ending. Even in the midst of the most extreme oppression and human subjugation, Cooper’s female protagonists usually manage to learn necessary lessons and make wise decisions. While highlighting the benefits of making wise decisions, she also laces her texts with many examples of characters that choose, but do not choose well. Hence, their outcomes are not as favorable. In *Family*, Cooper demonstrates the dire necessity of making wise choices through her depiction of black people, especially women, during American slavery and its aftermath who are forced daily to negotiate whiteness in order to survive it and maneuver around whiteness in order to prosper beyond it.

“Once upon a time . . .”: Cooper’s Clora as New World Griot

The black writer, having attempted the journey, preserves details of his voyage in that most manifest and coherent of all cultural systems—language. Through his work we are allowed to witness, if not the trip itself, at least a representation of the voyage that provides some view of our emergence.

--Houston Baker, *The Journey Back*

According to D’Jimo Kouyate, a Senagalese griot, “one of the roles that the griot in African society had before the Europeans came was maintaining a cultural and historical past with that of the present” (179). “The griot” explains Kouyate “was the oral historian and educator in any given society” (179). Although the focus of Kouyate’s essay is the need for all persons of African descent throughout the African diaspora to recognize their lost cultural connections to their ancestral homeland, it is also clear that he intends for the reader to understand that gaining such knowledge is only part of the battle. The greater task for the person of African descent when seeking accurate and complete knowledge of a displaced
African selfhood is to successfully achieve greater opportunities for self-empowerment. “This power” notes Kouyate, “must be used in a good way so that we [those members of the African diaspora] can help one another” (180). Consequently, the African griot’s primary focus beyond maintaining historical and cultural data, entertaining captive audiences, and serving as an interpreter of different facts for the king, was and is, as Kouyate vehemently stresses, “to teach the people to know themselves” (180). Although the descendants of those Africans who were snatched, dispersed, and displaced throughout the Western world during the trans-Atlantic slave trade are no longer bound to the cultural norms of their varying ancestral pasts, a cultural connection to those African elders of centuries past survives in the figure of the black storyteller. Hence, as Geneva Smitherman observes, “Every black neighborhood in every city in the United States comes equipped with its own story-tellers” (148).

Poetry, songs, and stories are the three avenues of language that most easily lend themselves to orality, which has been and still is a most prized ability in the black community. The writer who attempts to replicate the elements of orality on the written page takes on a formidable task. Black orality, much like the African oral tradition in general, has evolved into a complex art form. In an effort to create narratives that genuinely reflect the cultural nuances and concerns of black people, and, as Houston Baker explains in the epigraph above, allow the reader “to witness, if not the trip, then at least a representation of the voyage” (1), black writers often produce works that conform to Western narrative structural norms, but also are infused with dialogue, context, and settings that are identifiably black. J. California Cooper is such a writer. In order to better understand what Cooper achieves in terms of creating a space for her reading audience to receive the healing message of her text, it is
important to first ascertain how she does it. I argue that in the novel Family, Cooper creates in the narrator, Clora, the figure of a New World griot, a keeper of cultural memories. Through her narration, Clora invites, informs, and ultimately, instructs her readers, especially black women, to take control of their lives regardless of any factors that might seek to hinder their movement toward self-actualization.

Many book reviews on the fiction of Cooper often focus on the folksy, down home, sittin’ on a Southern porch, shellin’ peas style of Cooper’s narrators. This is mostly true of her short fiction and a more thorough discussion of these narrators will come later. Clora, the narrator in Cooper’s Family, possesses many of the aforementioned qualities of Cooper’s other narrators. However, she also possesses a particular quality that makes her stand out remarkably from the others. She is dead. She is, as she refers to herself, a “dead-but-not-gone-thing” (37). In an attempt to free her self from the clutches of physical, emotional, and sexual exploitation that she receives as a female slave, she decides to follow the example of her mother, Fammy, and commit suicide. However, to prevent her children from suffering as she has, Clora decides to kill them also. She dies, but her children survive. After a great deal of grieving, crying, and begging to stay with her children, Clora believes that God hears her pleas and allows her to remain in their midst so that she can watch over them. But this is all she can do. She has no power to influence their decisions or other’s decisions about them. She cannot in any way change the course of their lives. Her only supernatural power is that she can understand things with a “new kind of sense” (36). She can read nearly all minds, but she cannot change them.

When the reader first encounters the novel’s narrator there is little indication that she is the earthy southern black woman we find her to be later. There is no hint of a black or
southern dialect. Here the narrator utilizes conventional, Standard English in explaining how Clora came to exist. The southern black feminine voice that narrates the majority of the novel does not emerge until the narration moves out of the Africa of antiquity, out of the Africa of forced colonialism, and into the New World where slavery has gained an intense foothold on American soil:

Came the time when the slave catchers came. Some of the couple’s living children were taken. Stolen, separated and taken to many lands . . . sold. A few lived on. They had children. These children had children by their owners and others. Portuguese, Spanish, English, Italian, French, Irish, Scottish, others. Men from lands all over the world. Until one day, near my time, a girl-child was born who was to be my grandmother. In time, my mother was born. She lived and was sold, yet again. That is where I was to come from. Ahh, how sad, how sad for us.

So, once upon another time, a long, long time ago, time didn’t mean anything to my people, exceptin it was hard times all the time. And time can look endless. That’s the time I was born.

Some people say we was born slaves . . . but I don’t blive that. I was born a free human being, but was made a slave right after. (3)

It is important to note the frequent occurrence of the term “time” in the passage above. The opening pages of the novel are riddled with references to the concept of time, including the first line that reads “HISTORY. LIVED, NOT WRITTEN, is such a thing to not to understand always, but to marvel over.” (1). Here Cooper underscores the significance of human experience as a more valid surveyor of history than the written narratives displayed in history books. History books can be slanted as needed to highlight the valor, value, and virtues of the powers that be. This has been the case throughout the various world cultures. In America, a history of white patriarchal domination has mandated that those with lesser power find a way to highlight their history—their story—which often times differs from the master narrative.
Cooper literally breathes life into the history contained in this “liberatory narrative” by creating a narrator whose voice reflects a figurative birth when the novel’s character, Clora is born. This birth is signaled by a drastic change in the narrator’s language. *Family* is not intended to be a lifeless, chronological collection of historical events, i.e. the common textbook on history. Nor is it intended to be the common historical novel that presents a fictionalized depiction of historical events. What Cooper attempts to create in *Family* is a living narrative.

Cooper intends Clora to be received as a living, talking being who can serve as a medium and can bridge gaps between the past and present, between her children and her children’s ancestors, and between Cooper and her readers. Her role as medium also functions on several other levels that provide an extended meaning of what Henry Louis Gates refers to as “the trope of the talking book.” First, Cooper’s choice to create in Clora a speaking “dead-but-not-gone-thing” is a method of lending a sense of authenticity to the narrative so that the reader experiences the text as though it is a genuine narrative of an ex-slave. In this way, the novel itself can be viewed as existing somewhere between fact and fiction. Secondly, because Clora does not fully make the transition into the world of the dead, she is enabled to dwell in a “middle space” somewhere between the living and the dead where she can watch over her children from an emotionally attached, but physically detached distance. Also, in a new and expanded twist on the concept of the third person omniscient narrator, Cooper creates in Clora the ability to read minds and articulate events from the past, present, and future of both the characters in the novel and, in several instances, the reader herself. This last function as a medium is what is most intriguing about Clora as narrator. Her existence lies somewhere between the world of the novel and the world of the reader; a
phenomenon that is effectively demonstrated by her frequent addresses and admonishments to
the reading audience. Thus, while she cannot save the pain-filled lives of her own beloved
children who exist only within the confines of the novel’s pages, we, the readers, especially
those of us who can most empathetically identify with the pain and suffering of racial
discrimination and sexual exploitation, are the children that Clora can save. She saves us by
telling her story.

Clora, as narrator, possesses qualities that highlight the intense orality of the novel. In
her discussion of *Family*, Trudier Harris observes the novel’s “call and response” laden
narrative style when she states, “Above all else, Clora is aware of weaving a narrative, of
addressing an audience, and of having that audience support her emotionally and spiritually.
If God is her confidant, we are her secondary one. In the voice of intimacy and appeal that
she adopts, she plays mother to us as well as to her own family” (96). What Harris is
referring to here is Clora’s tendency to intrude on the linear movement of the narrative by
inserting words, phrases and sentences that are clearly directed at the reader. Addresses such
as “See?” (5), I’m tell you this” (55), and “You know what I did?” (222), are indicative of
Clora’s attempt at interaction between herself and her audience. Such intrusions are
characteristic of all of Cooper’s works, and support my contention that Cooper intends to
reach out to her readers through her fiction.

Such frequent narrative intrusions also augment the sense of contemporaneity between
the narrative voice and the reading audience. In other words, although Clora is narrating her
experiences as a slave and as a “dead-but-not-gone-thing” watching over her children and her
children’s children, such narrative intrusions allow the narrative voice to address and
comment on problems and events that occur in the everyday lives of the reader. These
occurrences add to my earlier argument that Cooper intends her novel to function as a living narrative. There are several examples of this technique throughout the text. For example, when explaining how perplexed she is at humanity’s tendency to part with their beloved money simply because they want the luxury of having someone else do their work, she exclaims, “Ain’t that true? Even now . . . today . . in your day?” (8). In another example, at the point when the progression of the Civil War allows Clora’s daughter, Always, to anticipate gaining freedom from her half-sister and mistress, Loretta, Clora comments: “Time passed. Don’t it always? So many things began to happen, I have to look back to tell of it and looking back is coming harder for me now. So bear with me” (152). It is apparent that Cooper intends the reader to experience this passage as though the “now” of Clora is the “now” of the reader.

Finally, in another example near the end of the novel, Clora, in her usual didactic manner, explains why the world is perpetually troubled. Always has died, yet Clora remains, year after year, in the same “in between” space where she can observe world events and human tendencies that subvert any possibility of peace among humankind. She proclaims:

You all had wars and famines, depressions and recessions, union fights, labor horrors, poverty worse, looked like, then some slavery. For all colors this time! People was catchin hell and didn’t have to die to do it!

Them men up there in them high offices, all over the world, was still lyin to you all. You all was letting em then. It ain’t changed too much now!

Time. Time don’t repeat itself, people repeat themselves! History couldn’t do it if you all didn’t make it. Time don’t let you touch it tho. God was wise. He sure knew what he was doin! Cause you all is reaching for the moon! Done got there! If the sun wasn’t so hot . . . God knew what he was doin then too, cause, see life depends on the sun. (228-229; emphasis mine)

Here Clora is speaking to us, the reading audience, in an attempt to force our recognition of the chaotic world that we have allowed to be created. In this way, the narrative moves beyond
In creating a “bird’s-eye” view of the past and constraining the reader to consider the verity of her view of the present, Clora finally does make a transition though it is not to a heavenly place that she anticipates reaching.

While telling her story, it becomes apparent that the events she narrates allow her to evolve psychologically. Clora’s attitude toward slavery and white humanity changes by the novel’s end. She moves from believing that suicide and killing her beloved children are the only routes for escaping slavery to understanding that had she waited she would have been freed anyway. More importantly, through the example of her courageous daughter, she witnesses that there can be other avenues for black women to subvert white domination and assert agency in their lives besides violence and/or giving up the struggle. Clora also amends her views regarding whites as the sum total of evil in the world. Earlier in the novel she states, “Them white people made hate. They made it just like they had a formula down to the last exact gallon of misery put in” (55). By the end of the novel she takes on a more inclusive attitude towards whites when she declares “… all these people livin are brothers and sisters and cousins. All these beautiful different colors! We!” (231). Thus, the pain from which Clora suffers at the beginning of the novel is in the end alleviated. By the end of the novel it is clear that Clora has moved from bitterness to forgiveness and from hatred to love. Sharing her story becomes the key to the fictitious Clora’s psychic healing. For the reader/listener who has shared in her journey, the events of the novel culminate in an invitation to reconsider the separatist ideas that inform race relations by promoting the acknowledgment of the familial ties that, if fully acknowledged, can bind humanity.
“And the moral of the story is . . .”: The Storyteller’s Message

“So some people will try to paint a peaceful picture of us folks singing in the yard washing somebody else’s clothes or dancing in the hot fields picking somebody else’s cotton—happy as a lark. But in the kitchen you learn that us folks didn’t dig the setup one bit.

--Toni Cade Bambara, Tales and Stories for Black Folks

. . . immunity to the serpent’s sting can be found in our tradition of struggle and our faculty for synthesis. The issue is salvation. I work to produce stories that save our lives.

--Toni Cade Bambara, “The Issue is Salvation”

In her essay “African-American Women’s Historical Novels,” Barbara Christian concludes that “as we move into another century when Memory threatens to become abstract history, they [African-American Women’s Historical novels] remind us that if we want to be whole, we must recall the past, those parts we want to remember, those parts we want to forget” (340-341). Here Christian explains the significance of the historical fiction of contemporary black women who center their works around the lives of black women during slavery and the Reconstruction years. Christian maintains that prior to the Margaret Walker’s Jubilee, there had not been an accurate depiction of the extraordinary lives of ordinary slave women and their female descendants. Even Walker’s novel, according to Christian, “despite the many historical details about which she informs her readers, [presents] characters [that] have little internal life . . .” (355). Christian attributes the lack of character development given to Jubilee’s Vyry and her community to the lack of interest in the personal lives of slaves prior to the Black Power movement of the 1960’s. In contemporary times, however, this is no longer the case. As established earlier, many black women authors today are creating narratives that force readers to confront the disturbing and invariably complex personal lives of black women during slavery. Those novelists who can “remember that which could not be recorded but which continues to exist in storytelling, in cultural patterns,
and in the imagination,” pass on the memories of strength, courage and endurance necessary to establish and maintain African American culture and community (Christian 338).

J. California Cooper’s narratives reflect this contemporary drive to examine the personal lives of black women during slavery and Reconstruction. Through these narratives, the reader is provided with an intimate (however imaginative) look at the strategies black women might have used not only to survive their condition, but also to improve upon it and move on with their lives. Ultimately, the healing message of the storyteller is clear: In order to move from helplessness to self-empowerment, one must fully understand and effectively utilize the fate determining power of choice. This message rings true in the lives of many contemporary readers, especially those who, due to the perpetually debilitating effects of specific historical events, may benefit from such a call to healing. In the fictive world of Cooper’s novels most characters, both black and white, struggle with overcoming the physical, social, and psychological restraints imposed upon them by the institution of whiteness. In examining how black women could have endured such soul pervading oppression, Cooper presents characters that consciously make the choice to survive white domination through racial passing, interdependent relationships with white women, and outright rebellion. By endowing her black female characters with the ability to subvert the forces of oppression, Cooper affirms the power of the human spirit over the most trying circumstances.

Many interviews with former slaves that took place during the Federal Writers’ Project of the 1930s and early 1940s testified to the havoc within the families of both slave and master when white men sexually violated their female slaves. Such acts of intrusion angered both the families of the slaves and, of course, the families of the slaveholder. In
Remembering Slavery, for example, Henry Ferry, a former slave on a Virginia plantation, gives an account of his master’s frequent visits to the cabin of a slave named Martha. As he remembers it,

Ôle Marse John ain’t never had no chillun by his wife. His wife was pow’ful jealous of Martha an’ never let her come down near the big house, but she didn’t need to ‘cause Marsa was always goin’ down to the shacks where she lived. Marse John used to treat Martha’s boy, Jim, jus’ like his own son, which he was. Jim used to run all over the big house, an’ Missus didn’t like it, but she didn’t dare put him out. (148)

Although there could have been instances when a romantic relationship between master and slave would develop, the probability of such a relationship budding and flourishing was more unlikely than likely. After all, the relationship between master and slave was one that was infused with the silent yet powerful codes of racial conduct that insisted upon the inherent inferiority of persons of African descent and the necessity of social separation between the black world and white world.

That Thomas Jefferson could have fathered several if not all of his slave Sally Hemings’s children, however, is possible. One only needs to examine the many documented accounts of slave masters intruding upon the families and bodies of black women during slavery to understand how miscegenation became part and parcel to the institution of slavery. Such race mixing, however, could at times serve to undermine the slavocracy’s system of oppression, for the power of whiteness could be obtained by persons of African descent and used to secure physical freedom from bondage. Psychologically, of course, a person who chose to pass might be haunted perpetually because there would ever be the fear of racial disclosure. Such fear would also necessarily mean that there would be limited contact, if any, with those black family members who were unable to cross the racial line into the world of whiteness. Such fear might mean that in order to keep up the illusion of membership in the
white race, one had to behave in ways that would bring physical and mental trauma to black people. However, this is a price that many “qualifying” persons of mixed racial heritage were willing to pay, both during and for many years after slavery, if it meant securing the ability to live a life free from white terrorism.

The concept of racial passing as a means to escape white oppression serves as an important theme throughout Cooper’s *Family.* The novel contains male and female characters who choose passing as a means to achieve personal gain, ironically averting white oppression by becoming white. Before moving into a discussion of the novel, I will examine “Color Me Real,” a short story from Cooper’s first published work, *A Piece of Mine,* as I believe this story to be Cooper’s first attempt at exploring the concept of racial passing that is expanded upon in each of her novels.

The title “Color Me Real” seems almost enigmatic at first glance. After reading this story which details the complicated life that Era, the protagonist, is forced to maneuver through, one better understands the intended message that underlies Cooper’s chosen title. Racial background becomes an issue that threatens to prevent Era from ever achieving personal happiness, as she suffers enormously under the weight of racial oppression. She is viewed by most of the men who want her not as a real human being with flesh, feelings, and personal desires, but simply as a color that can bring to the onlooker whatever satisfaction he believes he needs. As a result Era, a child of mixed racial ancestry, is physically and psychologically victimized by the racist world that the system of white hegemony has created. Her white skin allows her to pass easily into the white world, yet psychologically she is unable to shed her ties to blackness completely. In many ways, Era is a reflection of the world into which she is born. The circumstances surrounding her birth and the complications that
destroy her first two marriages are indicative of the contradiction created by a world in which blackness is both desired and despised and whiteness is both worshipped and abhorred.

Cooper opens the story by explaining, “it does not matter what year it was or where, it would have been just as terrible and tragic at any time” (65). The “it” to which she refers is the rape of Era’s mother, Minna by a “grown white man” when she was “a 13 year-old child.” (65). Cooper’s opening sentences are of significance because the physical and psychological degradation that Minna suffers at the hands of her morally bereft employer parallels other accounts of black women being raped during their adolescent years by lascivious white men in several slave narratives and works of fiction by African American authors. For example, “The Trials of Girlhood,” chapter five in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, is solely devoted to explaining why the age of 15 is such a “sad epoch in the life of a slave girl,” for it is this year that Jacobs’ master begins to make overt sexual advances toward her. Jacobs recounts that, “my master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import” (361). Jacobs believes that the only way to escape the constant torments of her master is by “consentually” bearing children with another white man, but even this act does not free her from the relentlessness of her master’s lascivious desires.

*Cane River*, a novel by contemporary author Lalita Tademy, provides another example of the plight of young black girls when subjected to the whims of white men. In this novel, Suzette, a slave on a nineteenth century Louisiana plantation, is forced to relinquish her virtue to a Frenchman who is visiting the family of Suzette’s owner, Louis Derbanne. She is a mere thirteen years old, but Eugene Daurat, who is twelve years her senior, sees in her the possibility for sexual conquest. Because Suzette lived in the main house and was a personal
nurse to Oreline, Louis Derbanne’s niece, she was afforded many opportunities that other slaves on the Derbanne plantation were not. Consequently, she dreamt of possibilities for her life that other enslaved black women the plantation could scarcely consider. Once she becomes the sexual target of Eugene Durat, a man who although not her master carries within his whiteness all of the privileges of ownership, Suzette’s hopes for a “real” wedding in a church and a respectable life are shred to pieces. The age of 13 is the year that Suzette ceases to be an innocent slave girl, for this is the year that she is exposed to the harsh realities of life as an enslaved woman.

In *Family*, Fammy brings to the attention of her daughter Clora, the dangerous probabilities in store for her as an enslaved girl turning twelve. She warns her, “They gonna count you a woman soon, for sure . . . Lord I can’t help you none, child” (10). In other words, womanhood for the slave girl begins the moment she catches the lascivious eye of the all-powerful oppressor, which in each of the above examples is any white man, master or not. At the time period in which “Color Me Real” is set, slavery has obviously ended, yet the supremacy of white men and the subjugation of black women of all ages has not changed.

Minna, as an employee of an unnamed white man, is subject to her employer’s sexual whims. Because she lives in a white supremacist, patriarchal society in which she wields little or no power, her ability to provide for her family is contingent upon her ability to keep her employer happy. Minna’s white employer never acknowledges the first child she conceives with him, yet expects that “after the first time he had seduced her . . . she would cease holding off her child-like fear and come sleep in his cold lonely bed, but she did not” (66). Initially, Minna decides to refuse the sexual coercions of her employer, but this only creates hatred in him. Although he is not her slave master, her predicament is quite similar to that of *Incidents’*
Jacobs, *Cane River’s* Suzette, and *Family’s* Fammy because her very livelihood is in many ways subject to the dominion of a white man. Selling her body for food and money therefore, becomes a means to end for Minna, as she does not believe that she has any other stock with which to secure the necessities of living.

Cooper’s graphic description of Minna’s final sexual encounter with this “grown white man” (66) highlights the inhumanity of a sexual predator. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that he suffers immensely as result of his morally degenerate behavior. While describing the tactics the white man uses to force Minna into his bed, the narrator explains that the execution of such extreme cruelty only allows him to see Minna and her family “grow nervous, hungry and afraid, but he [does] not see the anger” (66). She further adds, “His power blinded him, I guess” (66). This idea of a person being blinded by power moves from an abstraction into reality when the white man actually does become blind at the hands of Minna’s sickly grandmother who ultimately seizes power from him by “picking her herbs and roots and [puttering] over them silently” (66). These herbs eventually “found their way into the white man’s house and somehow he became blind which was soon followed, somehow, by impotency” (66). He is unable to find a wife because, as the narrator states, “no white woman wanted a blind, impotent husband” (67). Thus, as a result of the exchange of power, the white man becomes completely dependent upon Minna and her family for his very survival.

Cooper’s viewpoint on what Langston Hughes referred to as “the ways of white folks” is suggested by her treatment of white characters in this story and is further expanded upon in the novels that follow *A Piece of Mine*. Her depictions underscore a prevailing idea throughout “Color Me Real” and *Family*, which is that whiteness as a cultural construct that mandates a total subjugation of non-white peoples contains little, if any, redeeming qualities.
White cultural domination is presented as an evil that destroys any semblance of morality in whites. “Color Me Real,” however, accomplishes what *Family* does on a much grander scale; it subverts white authority. For example, unlike the black characters none of the white characters are referred to by name. Minna’s employer is not given a proper name. He is referred to as “a grown white man,” “seducer,” “this particular white man,” and “that white man,” but never is a name attached to this character. What is attached and remains as a constant in the memory of Era and Brother is his depravity. During a heated argument between Era and her brother, Era exclaims, “that white man who raped our mama was not just a white man, he was a child molesting, ignorant, slimy, cruel bastard . . .” (69).

Era’s first husband is also denied a name. He is simply referred to as “one of the clients” at a brokerage firm who is on his way to being rich. He views black women with the same desire for sexual and physical conquest as Era’s father and brother but also with equal amounts of contempt. This contradiction is indicated by his need to have secret sexual encounters with a black woman but apparent disgust at the thought of being married to one. The beating that Era receives at his hands is necessary in order for her husband to maintain his sense of power and control. Because he is unnamed he becomes merely another generic representation of the cruelty of whiteness.

Era’s second husband and her brother, both black men, behave in several ways that are just as despicable as the actions of Era’s father and first husband, yet the narrator bestows upon these cruel men the distinction of proper names. Reggie, Era’s second husband, not only violently beats her upon finding out that she is black but also “makes evil love to her as hard as he could” (72). Yet he, like every other black character in the story, is assigned a proper name. Although Reggie is depicted as being equally as savage as the white male
characters, Cooper’s decision to bestow upon him a first name seems to suggest that she is treating his character with level of sympathy that is not reserved for her white male characters. Perhaps she is inviting the reader to view Reggie and his behavior as reactions to the oppression he undoubtedly has received as a black man in America. Much like Era who chooses to pass for white as an escape from white oppression, Reggie has chosen to pursue a lifestyle that will place him on equal footing with other white men. Reggie, as described by the narrator, “was part of a good law firm, had a nice home, and a boat” (70). In Reggie’s mind, the only possession needed to add the final necessary boost to his self-esteem is a white woman. This is clearly indicated by the joy he receives from the “admiring glances from other lawyers and professional men” (70) and the frequency that he tells Era “you are my kind of woman” (70). Consequently, the exposure of Era as a black woman, especially in the company of other black men who had managed to “acquire” a white woman’s hand in marriage, is so devastating to his obviously fragile sense of self that he reacts violently in response to losing his most prized possession.

Cooper’s depiction of Era’s brother, “Brother,” is meant to elicit sympathy from the reader early in the story. In addition to the fact that he is initially referred to as “a man child that [his white father] never recognized” (65), the scene that describes the contemptuous circumstances of Era’s conception is loaded with emotional sentimentality. In this scene, Era’s father ties the infant to a chair so he can “ride [Minna] all morning and afternoon” (65). This horrific scene culminates with Brother “fall[ing] asleep, head hanging over the ropes tied around him by his father, his gasping breaths jerking his little body as he slept, crying out and again without even waking up” (66). Although “Brother” is not technically white (at least not by American standards), he is what the narrator calls “white skinned.” According to Era, as
an adult “brother” acts as if he thinks he is white. She declares this because he physically
abuses his black girlfriend in a manner that is akin to the way Era’s white husband beat her
upon discovering her familial ties to blackness. Her accusation is also informed by the fact
that although Brother refuses to marry this “dark-hued” woman, he maintains a sexual
relationship with her. Furthermore, he is unnecessarily cruel simply for the perpetuation of his
own sense of control and authority. “Brother,” like his white father, feels a sense of
entitlement with regards to the black female body. Neither the father nor the son views the
black woman as a person but as property upon which he can satisfy physical desires. But for
Brother, this need is amplified by his desire to assert his unobtainable right to whiteness by
devaluing blackness. Although Cooper does not excuse the behavior of Reggie and Brother,
the implications of the narrator’s conscious reference to their names serves to imbue them
with the humanity that is not granted in the descriptions of the story’s white male characters.
One plausible explanation for this is that Cooper wants the reader to recognize that both
Reggie and Brother are victims of racial oppression. The pathos of their lives, especially
where Brother is concerned, should be taken into consideration before final judgement is
made.

This is the world into which Era, Minna’s “white-skinned” daughter, is born. Because
Minna is able to secure a job in the schoolhouse in exchange for the opportunity for her
children to “sit in the back of the room to get a general education,” Era is granted the
opportunity to learn to read and write, skills which undoubtedly assisted her in her ability to
“pass” for white. Although she is certain to have been made privy to the horrific event that
resulted in her conception, she also understands that whiteness is an attribute that she
possesses which has the potential to afford her the ability to live a prosperous life. As the narrator explains:

Era was a good-looking woman and she chose to pass for white because it would make her life easier, and she planned to get ahead in life and get a wealthy husband to take care of her. She loved her family at home and planned to send them things and be good to them, but her greatest fear was of being hungry as she had been at some times in her life. She remembered doing without the smallest things that sometimes make a big difference in daily life. (67)

This need to acquire the perceived wages of whiteness--money, power and authority-- are the factors which influence her decision to leave her family behind and pass into the white world. However, much like the passing figure in earlier works by African American authors, she is unable to peacefully live with the lie.

It is challenging to the harmony of Era’s psyche each time she is forced to deny the existence of her black mother. She is unable to share the wealth she has acquired with her family because it would be too dangerous. Also, Era tires of having to look the other way when the white wives of her second husband’s black buddies congregate in the kitchen to discuss their innate superiority over their black husbands. As the narrator explains, “one of their fantasies was to picture them, during lovemaking, as slaves; the black skin glistening on the white skin helped multiple orgasms along” (71). Further complicating this issue is Cooper’s depiction of these white women as heartless souls who revel in their husbands’ tendency to ridicule black women for, among other things, “castrating their [black] men” (71). Eventually, the world the Era willingly passes into becomes too disconcerting to her soul and she is forced to return home to her roots.

The failure of Era’s first two marriages is the result of her inability to “pass” peacefully into the world of whiteness. Her husbands, both black and white, despise her
blackness. As Era explains, “one husband needed what he did not want . . . the other husband wanted what he did not need” (74). Passing, as demonstrated by the Era’s experiences, cannot yield what she seeks most desperately, peace of mind. Eventually, Era finds her way home to the “small kinda town” (74) where she was raised. Her quest for material gain is compromised by the possibility of finding true love in the arms of George, her childhood companion and protector whose love for Era over the years has grown so great that he waits patiently for her return to their hometown.

“Color Me Real” challenges the meaning of race and suggests that black and white Americans need to rise above the damaging concepts that inform racial constructs. Yet one cannot ignore the concluding paragraph that describes how Era, who finally finds love and a new life with George, ceases to be white or black and instead becomes his woman. The narrator also makes a point of describing how their marriage “leaves beautiful brown children on the beautiful brown earth” (78). This final reference to color in conjunction with both characters finally finding “love and peace of mind” (78) with each other suggests that in the end Cooper has little faith in the possibility for “white-skinned” black people to achieve happiness on the other side of the great racial divide. Passing may be a tool for maneuvering through the social limitations imposed on black people, but it cannot elicit the kind of true personal satisfaction that human beings usually strive for. In the final analysis, her story is an examination of the sickness that can result when self-hatred causes black people to covet whiteness. Cooper urges the necessity of black people, biracial or not, to actively seek a peaceful relationship with the self first, and eventually allow that self-love to blossom into harmonious and healthy relationships with one another and with others.
Racial passing as a strategy for liberation is more fully developed in each of her subsequent novels. However, it is her first novel, *Family*, that provides the most extensive exploration of the benefits and consequences of passing. Although the characters that consciously choose this strategy are presented quite sympathetically, Cooper consistently makes it clear that passing may be a means to an end, but it simply cannot yield true self-liberation. In every scenario, passing renders the character’s psyche more fragmented. The diseased environmental and social realities that create the desire for these characters to conceal their racial backgrounds—slavery, racism, and poverty—also serve to make their sojourn into the world of whiteness quite problematic. In Cooper’s novels, whiteness equals corruption and, as Frederick Douglass observes, “irresponsible power.” While being born with white skin does not automatically make one an heir to such destructive behavior, Cooper does suggest that having access to social and economic dominion and giving in to the pull of power that whiteness provides can create a most perfect corruption. The decision to pass as white then can necessarily bring with it a bevy of injurious behaviors, most of which are predicated upon the fear of exposure. Such fear always creates the need for the passing figure to overcompensate for concealed blackness solely in the interest of holding onto a most dubious treasure.

In *Family*, Peach and Sun are two minor characters who choose a life of “passing” instead of living out the life white society has assigned to them. As with “Color Me Real’s” Era, a horrific event precedes their birth—the rape of their black mother by a white man. Ironically, it is that same event that eventually grants them physical freedom, even as it keeps them in perpetual psychological bondage. While passing does allow them the freedom to pursue economic and social stability, it also necessitates that they deny all familial ties to the
black community. Thus, while the passing figure is able to enact agency over her own life by utilizing the privileges of whiteness, she is also obligating herself to a confused, frustrated existence that mandates self-denial and subterfuge. The negative, even treacherous, aspects of passing are described by Mary Helen Washington as “an obscene form of salvation” (164).

Washington further explains that,

> “the woman who passes is required to deny everything about her past; her girlhood, her family, places with memories, folk customs, folk rhymes, her language, the entire long line of people who have gone before her. She lives in terror of discovery—what if she has a child with a dark complexion, what if she runs into an old school friend, how does she listen placidly to racial slurs? And more, how does the woman who passes fond the equanimity to live by the privileged status that is based on the oppression of her people? (164)

Peach’s and Sun’s inability to effectively work through the issues Washington raises serve to add to the heroic qualities of the novel’s protagonist, Always. Clora, the narrator, who herself is the daughter of her enslaved mother’s white master, describes her first child, Always as “a very light baby, almost white” (17). She also adds, “look like a fresh peach. Rosy cream” (17). All of Clora’s children are conceived through rape by the same “Master of the Land,” Doak Butler, so it is not implausible that each child would be light enough to pass for white. However, Peach and Sun, it seems, are even whiter than Always. They are so white that when the opportunity presents itself, they both enthusiastically decide to pass as white. While she is still a slave, such an opportunity does not present itself to Always. However, upon her emancipation she has the opportunity to leave her ex-mistress’ plantation and pursue life as a white woman, but she does not. Always, who upon first seeing herself in mirror notices that she is “most white as her mistress” (41), continues to live as a black woman. More importantly, she uses her hard-earned skills to better the lot of other ex-slaves who remain.
Gathering up a strength reminiscent of Harper’s Iola Leroy, Always chooses to exorcise her personal demons and overcome the anguish of her past by remaining in the south and attending to the needs of her wounded community.

Peach and Sun, on the other hand, do not. They eagerly embrace the privileges that whiteness affords them, even if it means that they have to continue denying their family of origin and benefiting from the oppression of their brethren. Thus, the suggestion is that although Always is externally white enough to pass, she is too bound to her blackness to live such a lie. Instead, Always maintains allegiance to the blood ties that bind her to her mother, Clora, and her grandmother, Fammy. After all, her life is in many ways a repetition of theirs. To deny her blackness would be to ignore the physical and psychological sacrifices that they endured. Furthermore, to live as a white woman would essentially necessitate her own figurative death, which is in many ways akin to her grandmother’s and mother’s suicides. Indeed several scholars have indicated that the act of passing is in many ways akin to the notion of death. As Werner Sollors explains “‘passing’ may resemble the experience of death, or may at least be experienced as a form of social death.”(252). Mary Helen Washington makes a similar observation regarding how passing, as word that can also connote death expresses what she perceives to be Nella Larsen’s ambivalence about Clare Kendry’s decision to pass in the novel Passing (164). Always, as the novel’s heroine, is depicted throughout the text as strong, resilient, and shrewd. Taking her own life, whether figuratively or literally, would serve to contradict the elements of integrity that Cooper endows her with.

It is not surprising that Peach and Sun are not presented as Clora’s favorite children. Always is her favorite. Clora’s initial descriptions of Peach are rather unfavorable. As Clora
explains, Peach is “Sun’s favorite [sister], cause Always seem to be mean and serious all the
time” (49). Peach, on the other hand, is described as,

womanish, dainty and delicate. She envied Loretta her clothes and a nice
bedroom as she lay on her cornshucks and pulled her raggedy sack clothes
round her little cold body. As she would fall asleep nights, she would lay there
thinkin of ways to get into the big house to work, where them pretty things was
and them mirrors. (49)

Being “womanish, delicate and dainty, “and wanting “pretty things and mirrors” are not
necessarily negative attributes. However, they do suggest that Peach, even before she
understood what having white skin could mean for her life, was already leaning towards the
privileges of whiteness in ways that Clora’s favorite daughter, Always does not. A further
exemplification of this idea is when Clora further describes Peach as “not [her] hardest
workin child” and as being “extra lazy” (50). Having a desire for the luxuries of life while
being too lazy or too weak to work for their acquisition is a trait that every white mistress in
the novel possesses. For example, at one point Old Mistress, the first white mistress
mentioned in the text, is depicted as constantly “fussin and carryin’ on bout all the money the
farm was losin with no good care, even while she ate her pecan fudgies, baked ham and
chicken and rich stuff” (57). Eventually, according to Clora, “She became so big and fat . . .
she didn’t hardly come out of the house so she could see everything” (57).

From the moment she heals from the pain of losing her baby sister, Plum, to a
senseless act of white cruelty, Always becomes a “greater benefit to everybody” (97). Her
strong work ethic and drive to better her lot in life through hard work and shrewd planning is
highlighted in the following passage:

Once, when she was through with the kitchen and cleanin chores, she stood on
he backsteps and looked over the land a long, long time. It was poorly tended
at the time by a few hired labor. Then, she went to find a hoe and went out to
the land to work it, to see and feel it. The sun was hot upon her back, the sweat began to drip from the sides of her face to her breast as she hoed in good rhythm, easily, smoothly, turnin the dark, rich earth over. She stopped now and again, bent to feel and turn the soil in her hands, feeling it was good soil. Ever once in awhile she would look thoughtfully over the land. Finally she braced the hoe on her shoulder and walked slowly back to the house, put the hoe away. Never sayin a word to anybody. Just thinkin of what the land could bear (99).

Always does not tire easily because in her mind she is working towards and planning for a better future for herself. Peach, on the other hand, decides to work hard as her young mistress’s personal slave, but only because it brings her physically closer to the materialities of white privilege. As Clora explains,

She was extra lazy. But because there was so much extra comin to her from this job; the touch of the clothes, the feel of a carpet neath her wide, bare feet, smells of the scents on the dressers, the mirrors, Peach kept Loretta’s clothes neat, clean, washed, ironed, and hung up in the closet. The room was kept spic and span. The dresser dusted, oiled, shined, drawers lined. She never needed scoldin. (50-51)

Laziness, then, is presented as a luxury that black people cannot afford, but that white people, especially white women, revel in. This is not a new idea. Even Booker T. Washington (controversial as his observations regarding slavery may be) makes a similar claim when he states, “The slave system on our place, in a large measure, took the spirit of self-reliance and self-help out of the white people.”12 Peach’s willingness to behave in a manner that is contrary to her nature merely to continue dwelling in the presence of white luxury indicates that she covets the perceived privileges of whiteness in ways that her sister, Always and even her brother, Sun, do not. Sun, as we will see later in the chapter, much like his older sister, Always, merely wants to live his life as a free man, no matter what freedom may bring to him. Peach, however, is very specific about wanting to possess the material privileges that she associates with whiteness.
It comes as no surprise then when Peach eventually finds herself presented with the opportunity to live among white people as a rich white woman. Cooper has already established the idea that she would be good for nothing else. When Sun, Peach’s brother escapes north into freedom, Peach is forced to suffer at the cruel and jealous hands of their half sister and mistress, Loretta. Loretta loves Sun so much that she eventually succeeds in helping her brother escape. But she is jealous of Peach because Sun obviously loves her a great deal. Because she cannot receive from him the kind of open brotherly love that Peach receives, she becomes so jealous that she persuades her parents to sell Peach. Peach is purchased by someone whom Clora describes as “a man from somewhere cross the waters . . . was rich” (61). Her ability to read and write, a skill that she acquires indirectly from Loretta, allows her to read the few books that her new owners possess. As Clora explains, “Peach was no fool. She had fooled round in them few books they had, much as she could. She had read somethin bout them Rabian Nights what had told her somethin bout men and women” (61).

It interesting that Cooper would cite Arabian Nights as the primary text that teaches Peach how to “work that man” (61) by subtly constraining her new master into providing her with the material items that are indicative of wealth. Like Shahrazad in The Thousand and One Arabian Nights, Peach is forced into a "do or die" position. It is Sharazad’s expert storytelling ability that prevents her from meeting the fate of her previously cuckolded husband’s many past wives – death. She uses her ability to tell engaging cliffhanger stories to keep her new husband enchanted by the possibility of learning how the story finally ends on the following night. The king remains captivated in this manner for 1001 nights, until he agrees that he will not kill her, but stay happily married to her. Similarly, Peach uses her beauty and her acquired skills to captivate her new master. As Clora explains, “he bought her
nice things to wear and she looked good in em, so he bought her nicer things, beautiful things. She could cook, set a table, speak sweet and soft, and be quiet when she didn’t know what she and anybody else was talkin bout” (62). In other words, in her new master’s eyes she is the epitome of a perfect white wife. And she would need to be. Cooper’s reference to the Shahrazad coupled with the mysterious death of Peach’s master’s first wife suggests that this new master may have killed his wife in order to marry Peach. Clora suggests as much when she states, “maybe is was natural, but that [first] wife didn’t live much more than seven or eight months from the time he brought Peach home” (62). Apparently, Peach masters the ways of white womanhood so well that her new master is unable to resist her. He ultimately becomes complicit in a supreme act of racial passing when moves her to his home country, Scotland and marries her.

However, Peach’s decision to pass as white is not fully consummated until she changes her name. Peach’s decision to rename herself Peachel, “pronounced . . . Pe-SHEL” (62), symbolizes her complete relinquishing of her ancestral ties to her mother, Clora, her grandmother, Fammy, and those African ancestors who preceded them. Although Clora sympathetically affirms, “I understand tho, I understand” (62), and validates her daughter’s decision by acknowledging, “Peach used the only things she had to work with to escape the life of a slave” (62), it is ever apparent that Clora’s heart remains with Always, not with Peach. What is not so apparent, but subtly hinted at, is Clora’s slight resentment of Peach’s decision to pass completely out of the lives of her black family. Clora explains that she desired to “stay around and watch [her] family blood, see [her] family grow, if it could survive slavery” (62). But an obvious disappointment occurs as a result of Peach’s decision
to not only pass for white but to not pass on the story of her fore parents and their struggles as persons of African descent in the antebellum South:

*I wouldn’ta recognized my own children’s children, my own blood, if I hadda met them comin down the street right in front of my face. Years later, when Peach’s, well, Peachel’s grandchildren was all round her and some were darker than others, they ask her ‘Why?’ That ole Peach just laughed and told em, ‘Cause I’m from America! We are all colors in America! And you are American because I am!’ She never told the whole truth, but she never really tried to hide it or was afraid of it either. ‘Your grandmother, my mother, would have loved you.’ That’s *all she ever* told them about me. (63; emphasis mine)*

It initially appears that as far as Peach’s line of descent is concerned, Clora’s family blood does not survive slavery. Clora’s inability to recognize her children’s children who “[grew] in so many different lands and colors” (62) may reflect their lack of recognizable physical attributes that would signify her own “black blood” (62). This could also refer to her great grandchildren’s inability to recognize their familial ties to the “black” past of their fore parents, including their own grandmother, Peachel. Because Peachel does not share with her children and grandchildren the realities of chattel slavery that Peach’s “first family” endures, the connection to Clora’s “black blood” appears to die when Peach becomes Peachel.

Yet, as indicated by Clora’s inability to fully “die,” death does not always signify the end. And as illustrated by the myth that precedes the novel, a tree NEVER bears fruit that is not its own. Clora’s observation that “[her] blood ran into the world, hidden, but THERE” (63) is Cooper’s affirmation that, as *Beloved’s* Sethe discovers, the past never dies—it lives on to haunt the present. Accordingly, Peachel eventually begins to miss what Clora refers to as “her own first family” (217). Although she is truly pleased to have escaped a life of severe degradation as an enslaved woman, Cooper suggests that psychologically Peach is starving for blackness. Living as a white woman has afforded her many privileges and luxuries, but
ironically, she eventually tires of being forbidden to cross back over the color line to embrace blackness. Near the novel’s end when Peach finally convinces her husband to “allow” her to visit her “first family” in America, Peach is asked to take her niece Apple back to Europe. Peach agrees to take Apple “and anybody else that looks white” (218) home to Scotland. As Clora sympathetically explains, “[Peach] had done missed havin colored people somewhere around her. It gets to be that way sometime. And tho they was mostly white, they was still black” (216). In other words, as Werner Sollors observes, persons who choose to pass may be able to attain entrance into white society, but the sacrifices can at times create a great longing. They “simply miss the familiar world of their past, their friends, and families” (Sollors 252). No amount of money, power, or physical freedom can replace a healthy emotional attachment to one’s family and home of origin—at least this is what Clora would have the reader to believe.

One might surmise that Cooper is advocating some essentialist ideology that would validate the idea that blackness and whiteness contain genealogically traceable personality traits that inform the desires and behaviors of the individual. But this is not so. While it is reasonable that Peach’s personal happiness would be augmented by the inclusion of a member of her black family into her European home, the satisfaction that she receives is simply a mental construct, much the same way that the concept of race is simply a social construct. Apple will supply Peach with tangible evidence of her ties to blackness that her white husband and the rest of European society have, in her mind, forced her to disavow. However, as indicated by Sun eagerly agreeing to take his nephew, Soon home to his white family, these so-called racial connections are all in the mind. Soon (who will be discussed later in this chapter) is white—fully white; but Sun does not know this. He believes that he is returning to
his white family with a souvenir of his black past, Always’s son. As Clora explains, Sun didn’t care what nobody thought, but he didn’t want to be found out to be black yet either” (218). Not only is Soon not black, he is not Sun’s sister’s son. In the end, however, all that matters is that Sun believes that he is. Since Apple and Soon do not look black, yet were raised to believe they are, Peach and Sun are allowed to regain their connections to blackness without sacrificing their cherished white status.

Passing, as depicted by Cooper’s *Family*, is depicted as an effective strategy for diminishing the limitations that white oppression inflicts upon persons of African descent. Simply by not acknowledging her racial origins, a multiracial woman whose skin and facial features are close enough to her white neighbors can embed herself into white culture. A person can pass indefinitely, as in the cases Peach and Sun, or pass on a limited basis for the purposes of better employment or educational opportunities. In doing so, the “passer” is physically free to access every social and economic advantage that life as a white person could provide. However, deciding to follow this road to prosperity does not necessarily entail personal peace. In fact, while Cooper’s passing figures usually achieve personal prosperity and safety, they also suffer. They suffer because they are forced to deny ties to their families of origin; this necessitates acceptance of a lifestyle riddled with varying degrees of inauthenticity. Donning the mask of whiteness inevitably becomes a source of psychical conflict. Thus passing, as depicted by Cooper, is almost akin to making the proverbial deal with the devil. While it is quite effective as a strategy to escape the confines of blackness, it does not guarantee personal happiness. Furthermore, it weakens familial ties within the black community. Worst of all, passing essentially serves to exacerbate the historically deplorable relationship between blacks and whites. Instead of assisting in necessary healing between
these groups, passing perpetuates that old African American adage: If you’re white, you’re right; if you’re black, get back.” This was true during American slavery and it is true today. By creating a novel that explores the plausible realities for the historical person of color who chooses to pass into whiteness, Cooper underscores the fact that no matter the individual advantages obtained, there can be no true racial healing for anyone in a society where persons are forced to pass.

Interdependence of Slave Woman and Mistress

Toni Morrison’s Beloved presents a situation in which Sethe, a pregnant runaway slave, is trying to reach the shores of the Ohio River in order to be reunited with her children. Amy Denver, a poor white girl who is on her way north in search of red velvet saves Sethe’s and Sethe’s unborn child’s lives. The kindness that Amy displays to Sethe in her severe time of need is not to be discounted, but it should be noted that even within the confines of a remote, abandoned, weed infested shack these two “throw-away people”(84) relate to each other as oppressor and oppressed. Even though Sethe describes the young, indentured servant, Amy Denver, as “the raggediest-looking trash you ever saw” (32), she also knows to address her as “miss” while Amy refers to her as “nigger woman” (32). Of course, one could argue that such language merely reflects the social lingo of the era and that Amy’s kindness absolves her of any perceived adherence to the racist ideologies of whiteness. However, it is also important to note that upon her departure she informs Sethe that “she had to go; that she wouldn’t be caught dead in daylight on a busy river with a runaway” (85). Denver is herself a runaway, but her protective cloak of whiteness is a possession that she is not willing to compromise by being caught with Sethe. Sethe’s blackness is the barrier that prevents any potential for true friendship based on mutual love, respect, and support of another. Such a
relationship can rarely manifest itself in a society fueled by white privilege and black oppression.

In the “big house” however, relationships between slave mistress and female house slaves might have had the potential to take on new dimensions. According to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “Everyday proximity to mistresses permitted slave women special kinds of psychological resistance, the consequences of which are almost impossible to assess. Impudence and ‘uppityness,’ which are derived from intimate knowledge of a mistress’s weak points, demonstrated a kind of resistance . . .” (308). She further explains that “ . . . slave women who worked in the big house were uniquely positioned to resist the message of deference, to undermine the distinctions, and to make the lives of privileged mistresses an unending war of nerves” (309). Obviously, in such a situation where, as Sharon Monteith observes, “the empowerment of one group made manifest the disempowerment of another” (5), friendship between white slaveholding women and black enslaved women would be rare, if not impossible. In situations where there is no obligation on the part of the white woman to ensure the subjugation of the black woman (i.e. Beloved’s Sethe and Amy), there might be a minimal possibility for “friendly acts.” But during slavery and for several years after its abolition, white and black women did not share equal social status, so they could share little else either.

It is not surprising then, that Cooper’s Family contains zero examples of friendship between black and white women. What she does provide, however, are numerous illustrations of how and why certain white female characters grow to depend upon their black female house slaves. While there are no images of true intimacy between slave mistress and female house slaves, there are situations where in the right time and in the right
circumstances, both parties benefit from the close ties. Yet, based on the examples provided, the benefits for black women from such dependency are minimal in the long run because black women are still subject to the ongoing cruelties of the “Masters of the Land.”

A shared condition of subservience to white patriarchy is the most plausible reason that white women and black women could develop any genuine relationship beyond oppressor and oppressed. Although white women certainly possessed a greater degree of protection from the white male domination than did black women, their suffering was not always minor. Cooper makes a point of highlighting the fact that white patriarchal domination in the antebellum South subjugated white women also. The clearest example comes from Clora’s revelation that the constant physical abuses that her mistress perpetrates upon her is fueled, not only by jealousy, but also by a sense of powerlessness that threatens to consume her. Angelyn Mitchell explains the white mistress’s unfounded behavior as the result of her inability to “assign blame to the rightful party” (117), her husband. Because she is a woman, Clora’s mistress can do nothing to end her husband’s predilection for slave girls. It is, after all, not only a family tradition, but also a pleasurable method for the “Master of the Land” to secure more wealth for the plantation through the many slave children that inevitably result from such sexual unions. Clora’s remembers, for instance, that her mother “. . . carried and had nine of [her master’s] babies what he got good feelin from and good money for!” (8). The mistress sells these children because they are “too white and looking like the Master of the Land,” and because their sale provides her family with more wealth.

Each of Clora’s mistresses then, both young and old, are placed in very precarious positions. On the one hand, they are women who marry for love and who cherish their families. On the other hand, they are constrained to endure the constant betrayals of husbands
who add insult to injury by producing living reminders of marital infidelity. As Clora states, her second mistress initially was a “sweet-faced, laughing little lady who mighta tried to be nicer to the slaves if [her husband] hadda done right” (22). She goes on to explain,

The young mistress told the Young Master, “WE will always love only each other. NO slaves to bed with like some other no-account low whites.” He agreed cause she was new and his and loved her. But time kept passing like it does and pretty soon he was at me or somebody again. That Young Mistress took to hating us, and him, and soon after that, life got hard up there in that house and out there in them fields even. (23)

This hatred that the mistress feels for both her husband and the black female objects of his desires, initiates the incident that leads to Clora’s revelation regarding the commonalities between her own condition as a slave and her mistress’s position as a slave owner’s wife:

. . . the Young Mistress come in and was looking at my baby who was looking like her husband. I just kept working. Then that Mistress leaped at me and commenced to slappin me with her hands, first, then a poker that was kept by the fireplace. She hit my baby, oh Lord. Now, I could take a beatin from her. But I was holdin my baby and my baby was too young to take a beatin. Well . . I took the poker away from her!! WE was both of us shocked! I was shocked to be a fool to struggle with the Mistress of my life, and she was shocked at the sudden change in our way-situation roles, and we was like stuck in time, just starin at each other. Her arm raised to strike and the poker raised in my hand to strike her back! Now! We stood there like we was stone, looking hard in each other’s eyes and from somewhere the idea came that this women who was built like me, shaped like me, had eyes, nose, ears, arms, legs, and blood just like me didn’t know what she doin in this here thing either. The Master of the Land was Master of us both, and all of us, in this thing and she was captured in a net just like I, as a slave, in this net of time. But . . . she loved him, the Master, while I did not. She had her pain alright, but, I knew mine was worser cause I had her kind of pain . . . and my own and my children’s too. AND he liked her, which made her life better. He didn’t give a damn for me . . . I was nothing . . . (31-32)

What begins as an instinctual reflex of a mother protecting her child evolves into a greater revelation about the possible reaches of patriarchal dominance in the antebellum South.

Cooper’s depiction of the struggle that ensues between Clora and her mistress suggests that
antebellum women, regardless of race or class, are subject to the whims, rules, and regulations of white men. In such a situation, husbands, fathers, lawmakers, and clergymen would retain more control over a white woman’s life than she would and it would therefore be useless for Clora’s mistress to express discontent with her husband’s lascivious need for black female bodies since she has little or no social or economic leverage. Certainly Clora’s belief that her mistress should have been an ally who “should have helped [her] . . . not struck [her] for bein a slave to him” (32), suggests that she for the first time understands that the possible power dynamics at work between slaveholder and slaveholder’s wife render her mistress powerless.

Yet such a notion, according to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, is only partly true. Her research indicates that slaveholding women “never figured as mere passive victims of male dominance”(44). While Cooper’s position regarding white women’s subjugation in the antebellum South is the more popular belief, Clora’s concluding words concerning her alleged shared victimization with the mistress serve to undermine a full validation of such claims. Her final words are more akin to Fox-Genovese’s conclusion that slaveholding women both “benefited from their membership in a ruling class” (44) and “felt minimal kinship with their female slaves, with whom they might have intimate, if tension-fraught, relations in everyday life” (43). Clora’s initial attempt at empathy for the mistress is thwarted therefore, by the realization that her mistress is incapable of giving her the same consideration. Minrose Gwin reiterates this idea in examining cross-racial female relationships depicted in American literary reflections of the antebellum period, the Civil War, and Reconstruction:

White women—fictional or actual, writers or subjects—rarely perceive of acknowledge . . . the humanity of their black sisters. Most of these white women in life and in literature see black women as a color, as servants, as children, as adjuncts, as sexual competition, as dark sides of their own sexual selves—as black Other. They beat black women, nurture them, sentimentalize
them, despise them—but they seldom see them as individuals with selves commensurate to their own. (5)

Despite the depictions of mutual hatred between slaves and mistresses, there are moments in *Family* when mistress and slave also find themselves bound together in mutual dependency. For example, although Apple is the daughter of Loretta, Always’s white, half sister, and Sephus, Always’s son, Loretta is unable to accept the child as her own. She knows that if anyone ever discovered that she had happily conceived a brown skinned child with a black man, she would be ridiculed and ostracized. Thus Always, whose children had been sold one after the other, is overwhelmed with joy at the possibility of being able to keep her grandchild without fear of losing her. As Clora explains, “Little Apple moved on out to the chicken house that was Always’s home, and became Always’s daughter-child and Always knew she now had a baby wasn’t nobody gonna sell from her” (170). Furthermore, Loretta’s dependence on Always to be a loyal slave makes the birth of the child possible. In addition to helping Loretta through child labor and assuming responsibility for mothering the only child Loretta ever has, Always also provides Loretta with nurturing roots and herbs to ensure a healthy birth. While Loretta believes Always is providing an abortifacient concoction, as requested, Always has cleverly discerned that Loretta is trying to end an unwanted pregnancy.

There other instances throughout the narrative that demonstrate varying levels of forced intimacy between mistress and enslaved woman. The most significant example of such a relationship occurs between Always and another mistress – a kind one. At no other point in the novel is the dependent nature of white womanhood more prevalent than when it results in Always obtaining freedom from white oppression. But as the events of the novel demonstrate, strategies such as passing and maximizing on white women’s dependence in
slave women only yield minimal victories. The only strategy that yields the fullest amount of freedom from white oppression is rebellion.

**Rebellion**

According to Lawrence Levine, stories of slave opposition related through the sensibilities of former slaves generally took three forms: escape by running away, confronting the authority of overseers and masters, and protection slaves gave or tried to give to those they loved. Such stories were imparted to children, community members, and other interested listeners with pride and admiration. While examining the many tales of slave heroism in the face of extreme physical and psychological terror, Levine concludes,

> I have only begun to touch upon the reservoir of tales and reminiscences which stress slave courage, self-respect, sacrifice, and boldness. These stories were told and accepted as true—a fact of crucial importance for any understanding of post-slavery Afro-American consciousness. Once again a vibrant and central body of black thought has been ignored while learned discussions of the lack of positive reference group figures among Negroes, the absence of any pride in the race in the Afro-American past, the complete ignorance Negroes have concerning their own history, have gone on and on (396-397).

What I find to be particularly important about Levine’s discussion of the heroism of slaves is the potential power of affirmation such reminiscences must have had on the listeners. The pride with these “handed down” tales, legends and stories were rendered suggests that the storyteller’s intention was to impart race respect and dignity to descendants of slaves who were fortunate enough to have been born after slavery’s demise, but were also susceptible to feelings of black inferiority and self-hatred. In *Family*, the character of Always is the kind of heroic figure that Levine is referring to. Clora as medium/storyteller relays the story of Always with the same sense of pride Levine examines. Although the story is fictitious, the possibility exists that there were many black women who displayed the kind rebellious
heroism demonstrated by Always. For the contemporary reader, especially those that
comprise Cooper’s primary reading audience, *Family* is an excellent opportunity to transmit
the stories of “fathers and mothers . . . who committed sacrifices worth remembering, who
performed deeds worth celebrating, and who endured hardships that have not been forgotten”
(Levine 397).

Although *Family* presents several women characters that behave in an admirable
fashion, Always is clearly the novel’s heroine. It is her positive attitude and persistent belief
in the possibility for bettering her lot that endears her, both to her mother and the reader. She
is the child that Clora speaks about most frequently and the character that achieves the
greatest amount of personal autonomy. But what makes her even more heroic is that unlike
her sister and brother who achieve physical (but not psychological) liberation by running
away and/or passing, Always utilizes cunning intellect and an infallible desire to achieve
freedom on her own terms. Her choice to rebel against white oppression is very similar to the
choices made by several former slaves documented in Levine’s text. Always endures the
violent losses of her mother and youngest sister at the hands of white slave owners.
Furthermore, she survives being raped by a new master, Doak Butler, just after she is sold
away from the only home she had ever known. However, following in the tradition of her
grandmother, Fammy, who achieved her freedom by attacking her master and killing herself
(essentially stealing his property) and her mother, Clora, who attempted to save her children
from slavery by taking them with her in death, Always chooses to rebel against white tyranny.
The only difference is that she chooses to live and make those responsible for the demise of
her family pay for their avaricious cruelty.
Always’s most admirable attribute is that every decision she makes serves to challenge the idea of white racial superiority. As established earlier, Always does not choose to pass—at least not literally. However, she does “pass” indirectly by finding a way to utilize passing as a tool to achieve future security, which is the only reason the socially, economically, and physically oppressed decide to pass anyway. In an act that recalls Mark Twain’s *Puddinhead Wilson* (1892), Cooper signifies on the false nature of white supremacy through Always who, by honoring the legacy established by her mother and grandmother, chooses rebellion over acquiescence. However, when faced with the same circumstances as her foremothers—rape and bearing the master’s child—she chooses life instead of death by switching her son with the master’s son, both of whom were born on the same day.

Although Always has no set plan for achieving the sense of agency she desires, she understands that she must find away to secure her future. Instead of allowing herself to become consumed by the hatred she feels for Doak, she channels her anger and uses it as a source of motivation. Always makes herself indispensable to the plantation by working the hard unruly land into a fertile ground suitable for producing a healthy harvest and endearing herself to Poon, a fellow enslaved woman and Jason, the master’s crippled brother. Most importantly, Sue’s (the master’s wife) dependency on Always becomes the deciding factor in Always’s ability to execute her plan.

The scene that ushers in the baby switch is another example of how Cooper creates in *Family* an opportunity to showcase the heroic strength of black women, specifically Always. Sue’s dependency on Always constrains her to only desire Always’s presence during her labor. Although Always requests that Poon, a more seasoned child-bearer, be present to assist with the birth, Sue retorts: “No, no! I don’t want nobody to see me like this. I only want
you” (103). When Sue’s son is born, Always tries to place the child in its mother’s exhausted arms, but she refuses to take the child. Had Sue taken her son at that moment, Always’s plan may never have been formed and certainly not executed. But she does, and Always takes Sue’s child into her own care, feeding it and mothering it as her own. When her own labor begins soon after bringing Sue’s son to her shack, Always brings forth her own son whose resemblance to his brother is unmistakable. Both have white complexions and dark hair, but the eyes of Always’s son are blue, just like his father’s.\(^14\)

Although it takes awhile, Always eventually understands the significance and potential of this moment. When she burns a tiny mark, essentially a brand, into her skin and that of her son, she is, in a sense, creating a visible mark of servitude and thus creating insurance for her future. Having endured so many years of cruel and inhumane treatment, Always intimately understands what occurs when a person is endowed with what appears to be unlimited power over others. By placing her son into the seat of power, Always attempts to protect herself and her future from the tyrannical behavior she fears her son will one day embrace. It comes as no surprise then, to Always nor to the reader, that Always’s son, because he is raised to be a slave-owner, assumes the most distinctly avaricious aspects of whiteness, while the master’s true son, who is raised as a slave, is consistently hardworking and kind.

When Doak Jr. returns home after having served as a confederate soldier, he is anxious to begin life anew as master of the land, even though the war and thus slavery has ended. While questioning Always about alleged gold that had been buried in an attempt to prevent Union soldiers from procuring it, he stumbles across what undoubtedly is the shock of his young, white life. The violent emotions which run through his being force him to say and act in a manner that fully attests to how thoroughly he has been corrupted by the irresponsible
power that being white and male has bestowed him with. Always’s only chance to protect herself from violent verbal and physical attacks of the son she gave birth to but never claimed, is to expose the secret she has carried for so many years. Thus, just as Doak reaches his highest level of white cruelty and Always no longer believes she can continue fighting him, the mark/brand not only saves her life, but it also becomes the deciding factor in her ability to achieve a sense of personal liberation from the degradation of white supremacy. According to Orlando Patterson, branding was a customary form of slave identification in the Americas. Although often used as a form of punishment, the presence of a brand on a slave usually signified that the person branded was property. In this case, the mark/brand denotes Always’s ownership of the man she has placed in the position of master.

What is so interesting about this scenario is that earlier in the novel, Clora uses the term “master of the land” as a moniker for the position white men place themselves in when they become owners of human beings. As masters of the land, white men have the luxury of bending the will of their property (slaves) and benefiting from the fruits of their property’s labor. By branding her son, Always essentially reverses this reality. Doak Jr.’s fear of losing all that whiteness has afforded makes him a servant to the woman he believes is beneath him. This covert act of rebellion, as Angleyn Mitchell aptly points out, serves to “subvert not only the racial constructs of society, but the economic and legal constructs as well”(121). The following passage exhibits the intensity of this situation for both mother and son:

“I the onliest chanst you have to get that gold. Don’t put your hands on me no more again. And if you don’t help me, your mama, out of the kindness in your heart . . . then help me cause I will tell Loretta and everyone else . . . And they will listen to me. You can’t cut that mole out, cause it will only leave a scar. So YOU IS MY SON.”

Doak stood there with hate written all over his face, tears runnin down it too.
Always stepped toward him, then stopped herself. “I don’t never need to tell nobody. I wants you to keep on livin good and fine. Just . . . I want to live good too. Just help your mama, son, help me get away too. They will let you buy that land and give it to me cause they blive you white and you can do whatever you wants to.” (198)

Earlier in the novel, Always makes a point of expressing how much she had come to love the land she had worked and nurtured, having brought it back from a barren state. The significance of her feelings are amplified in her words to her son because for Always “getting away” does not mean running away from the south as her brother Sun had. Nor does it mean passing away from her African ancestry as both her brother and sister had. Always, in the tradition of Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1893), intends to “get away” by making it possible for herself and other newly emancipated blacks to prosper at home – in the south. As Always ponders just after her triumphant confrontation with Doak Jr:

“Lord, do freedom mean I got to leave my home? This my home too. Where else I’m gonna go? Where else I’m gonna lay my tired body down if not here where it got tired. Here, where my dead sister and baby is layin deaf at? All my babies you done give me . . . been sold by this master to buy this land. This land I hold here in my hand. If that don’t make it mine, Lord what do?” . . . I know this dirt like my own blood runnin in my body. Like my hands and feet. My body don’t stop lord. This land is past of my body. My roots is deep in this ground. I came, they bought me, I slaved here, This my land. (201-202)

The property she forces her son to buy for her becomes a school for blacks and is owned and operated by Always and her husband. Always’s vehement invocations indicate that she feels strong connection to the land on which she stands. But even beyond this, Always’s speech can be viewed as reflective of Cooper’s attempt to impart to her readers, especially African Americans, that their citizenship has been bought and paid for. In other words, if Always had the gumption to rebel against the tyranny that threatened to destroy her very being, then any modern-day readers should never feel hampered by circumstances which appear to outside of
the pale of their control. As the life of Family’s heroine so nobly demonstrates, where there is a will, there is always a way.

Endnotes


3 Consider that Dessa Rose was written in response to and protest of William Styron’s Confessions of Nat Turner and Alice Randall’s The Wind Done Gone is a retelling of the quintessential civil war narrative Gone with the Wind.

4 I vividly remember one professor who during my doctoral studies criticized my use of Akbar’s theoretical observations in my discussion Haile Gerima’s film, Sankofa. According to Professor X, Akbar has not been validated as a “critical scholar” and thus his findings are not necessarily useful for a scholarly examination of any text.

5 It is unknown who her helper is, but this person is obviously of significance in Cooper’s life.

6 Interestingly, during my interview with Cooper, she revealed that this myth and the novel, Family, were submitted to her publisher as separate items. It was the publisher who decided that these two texts should be bound together. Cooper offered no opposition; therefore I have concluded that she not only agrees with the publisher’s decision but also condones my observations.

7 See “An Interview with J. California Cooper” following this study.


9 See Gates’s discussion in the “preface” to Norton Anthology of African American Literature, p. xxviii.

10 There is a plethora of novels in African American Literature that focus on the concept of passing as a central conflict. Nella Larsen’s Passing and Quicksand, Jessie Fauset’s’ Plum Bun, Charles Chesnutt’s The House Behind the Cedars, James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man and George Schuyler’s Black No More are each earlier novels that examine this phenomenon. Cooper’s Family echoes many of the thematic strains present in these earlier works even as her novel directly addresses a contemporary audience.


13 Lawrence Levine, Black Culture, Black Consciousness, pgs. 394-396.
14 Though Cooper does not admit it, this plot twist recalls Mark Twain's *Puddinhead Wilson* (1892).

Chapter 4: “In Love, In Trouble”: Cooper’s Women and the Men who “Love?” Them

Don’t be lonely when you get old. Don’t be broken down and used up. Try to save yourself some self, try to have something for yourself, and try to get somebody whose gon’ love you through thick an’ thin, high or low.

--J. California Cooper on love.¹

In *Family*, as in her other novels, J. California Cooper adds to the collective voice of contemporary historical novels that revisit and revise the cultural memory of enslaved black women and men. The very act of revision suggests that there is a need to amend or correct a previously acceptable idea. To this end, such novels serve as implements for healing the psychical wounds that are the residual affects of slavery. In the previous chapter, I discussed the significance of the black woman’s struggle to assert control over her life under one of the most extreme displays of white hegemony, American slavery. I argued that Cooper’s *Family* is not only an opportunity for all reading audiences to acknowledge the common bonds of humanity and the soul-shattering consequences of American slavery, a horrific institution that continues to problematize the relationship between blacks and whites. I further argued that contemporary African American female readers can glean from the experiences of Clora, Peach, and Always examples of black foremother figures who dared attempt to traverse the many obstacles that would serve to destroy the power of their voice, their familial connections, and most significantly, their sense of humanity. In chapters 4 and 5, I will extend the concept of narrative/storytelling as a tool for healing by turning my attention to the works of fiction for which Cooper is most famous, her short story collections.

The stories in J. California Cooper’s collection, *A Piece of Mine* focus on women who are on that universal and age-old quest for true love. In each story, the protagonists are eventually constrained to make a choice: either find the strength to rebel against traditional expectations of black female self-sacrifice and submission in order to achieve self-
actualization or suffer endlessly because they are unable to do so. For Cooper’s women, a pre-requisite for self-actualization is finding the path that allows them to honor the self first and foremost. Only then can she be rewarded with a loving black man who himself understands that his own quest for true love requires that he also turn his back to the traditional expectations and accepted behavioral patterns of black manhood and embrace a healthier and more harmonious image of self. A Piece of Mine also links Cooper to other black women writers whose fictional narratives also address the problems encountered during a black woman’s search for love and intimacy, a journey often compromised by a dominant culture that historically has promoted male domination which often subverts the black woman’s ability to make healthy connections with black men.

In chapter 4, I examine Cooper’s utilization of the fictional storytelling event as a mechanism for exposing the traumatic realities of black intimacy. In doing so, she challenges her readers, especially black women, to acknowledge the possibility of their own complicity in the perpetuation of such trauma and offers alternative choices that can facilitate healing between black men and women.

Strong Black Women and the Price of Intimacy

It cost me a lot, but there’s one thing that I’ve got, its my man.”
--Billie Holiday, “My Man”

In Saints, Sinners and Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature, Trudier Harris asserts that the stereotypical image of the physically large or overbearing Mammy figure is an American icon that was created in the minds of eighteenth century whites and embraced in the psyches of twentieth century whites. Disturbingly, well into the twentieth century blacks themselves perpetuated many of the same myths. As Harris
explains, “What is equally if not more striking than the images themselves is the point at which black popular imagination intersected with white historical creations of black women to give sanction to these distortions. We do not have to look far to explain why white Americans may have needed such images, but why did black people?”(7). The idea of black people needing such an image is a troublesome concept. It conjures up varying images of self-hatred, perpetuated in vicious cycles from one generation to the next. Harris’s observation highlights this myth as one of the many examples of cultural illness that continues to plague the black community. As she presents it, the myth of the strong black woman is a peculiar illness that is replete with contradiction. On the one hand, black women who have managed to survive slavery, disenfranchisement, poverty, and sexual exploitation are revered as the embodiments of strength and endurance. This honor, however, is a double-edged sword. In the realm of intimacy between the black man and woman, such perceived strength does not make for good loving. In fact, it can bring just the opposite—in truth and in fiction.

As Harris argues,

When romance or marriage is relevant to literary conversations about strong black women, the emphasis upon strength that approximates manliness takes a different turn. Larger and stronger black female characters are painted as too much competition in wife-beating scenarios; therefore, black men have to use undue force and just knock them out or the men run the risk of being knocked out by the women. (15)

She references Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), Alice Walker’s The Color Purple (1982), and Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye (1970), each of which depicts instances where black women, perceived to be too strong, whether physically or mentally, are challenged, degraded, or abused by their husbands. Such abuse is condoned, even mandated, by a system of patriarchy founded on the premise that manhood is defined in direct opposition
to womanhood. Men should be strong, while women are to be “the weaker sex.” Men should be domineering, while women are to be dominated. Men should be caretakers, while women are to be taken care of. These are just a few of the dynamics at work within many intimate heterosexual relationships. However, the realities of individual personality development often serve to frustrate the expected social role-playing of men and women. Furthermore, life circumstances such as socio-economic status, class divisions, and racial injustice can often compromise such rigid gender role constructs. It is therefore not unusual to find instances where prescribed gender roles appear to be inverted, subverted, or just plain destroyed.

“100 Dollars and Nothing” and “He Was a Man (But He Did Himself Wrong)” are stories which examine the fragility of the male ego and the tendency for seemingly strong black women to voluntarily feed such egos by subjecting themselves to tyranny. Although some might argue that Cooper’s depiction of her black male characters severely demonizes them, in actuality, these stories create familiar problems and scenarios that many black women may find familiar. In both stories, women freely and naively hand over the reins of their lives to the men they love; loyal and loving, they sacrifice themselves in order to maintain and protect the manhood of their men.

Each story is a fictional storytelling event which focuses on issues that afflict black male/female relationships. Like many of Cooper’s short stories, each story is loosely contextualized or “framed” by an opening paragraph that introduces the narrator, provides the setting, and establishes the tone of the coming tale. By loosely, I mean that these stories do not fully reflect the requisite components of a traditional frame text. In From Within the Frame: Storytelling in African American Fiction,” Walter Ashe defines the opening
paragraphs of such a text as the “open frame which begins the story or novel”(2). As Ashe explains,

The open frame ends when the tale begins, and in most frame texts the tale is rendered virtually uninterrupted until completed. When the tale is over, the narrator/listener regains (explicit) control of the narrative, so that once again the reader sees the action of the story through the listener or narrator’s point-of-view. . . . Taken together, the open and close frame act as a mediator between the tale and the reader. In much the same way a traditional frame around a painting controls the viewer’s visual movement from wall to painting back to wall, the open and close frames in a frame text prevent the teller from speaking directly to the reader. (2)

Although many of Cooper’s stories contain an opening frame which conforms to Ashe’s definition, they differ in that Cooper’s narrators do speak to the reader; the narrator never gives up authorial control over any aspect of the story, whether inside or outside the frame. In both her novels and short stories, it is not uncommon to encounter a narrator who addresses the reader directly, especially in the opening and closing paragraphs.³ Cooper insists on creating a fictional storytelling event in which the reader is clearly identified (by the narrator) as the listening audience. Thus, the borders that separate the reader from the story are not so obvious as in a traditional frame text. Like Family’s Clora, the narrators in “100 Dollars and Nothing,” “He Was a Man,” and several other stories by Cooper act as bridges rather than barriers; they invite the reader into the text by speaking to a presumed audience that, as Ashe explains, “enjoy[s] being told a good story in addition to reading one” (5, italics not mine).

Although there is no definite proof that Cooper’s presumed audience for each story is comprised of black women, the evidence is implied. Stories that contain first person narrators who sound as though they are speaking to a specific listener somewhere outside of the text’s border assume what Gerald Prince refers to as a “narratee.” In such cases, Prince argues, “a text may not necessarily say whether the narratee is a reader or a listener. In such cases, it
could be said that the narratee is a reader when the narration is written . . . and a listener when the narration is oral” (9). The concept of a narratee suggests that the reader/listener plays some active role in how the text is framed and, therefore, understood. Such negotiations recall Kay Stone’s sentiments regarding the interplay between narrator, reader, and text: “As active readers, your immediate memories, your own souvenirs, allow you to cross the oral/written border and recreate the story for yourselves, making it more than a mere record” (11). Furthermore, as Brian Strum asserts, “The storyteller recounts the text, while the listeners create the true story based on the verbal text and overlaid with personal images and memories” (15).

Each cited critic suggests that how the reader/listener experiences the story is just as important as the storyteller’s performance and the story itself. The reader must have personal memories that can be addressed by the events of the text or she may indeed only see the story as simply entertaining or perhaps a “mere record.” She certainly will not feel like an active participant, a “narratee,” in the story. Since stories so often convey explicit or implicit judgments about the actions of individuals and the unfolding of events (Maybin 130), it seems plausible that when the narrator presents characters, events, and language that are familiar to a particular reader/listener, any moral lessons the teller imparts may touch that audience more than others. Any suggestions or roadmaps toward healing are more apt to be detected and utilized by that audience who can bring to and take from the text memorable souvenirs. As with the majority of Cooper’s fiction, that audience is black women.

Set in what the narrator refers to as a “big little town” (1), “100 Dollars and Nothing” is the story of Mary, an enterprising entrepreneur, who chooses to marry Charles, a greedy, lazy, and jealous man whose initial verbal taunting eventually descends into constant
emotional abuse. Mary does not initially perceive Charles to be the pathetic individual he is, and as time passes he clearly becomes her source of heartache and psychological devastation. Mary, who was abandoned by her parents and left at a white orphanage is desperate for any kind of loving and does everything possible to please her husband. He says she is too skinny, so she gains weight. He then decides that she is too fat. He says he does not need her for anything, yet he has no job outside of working in their store. To make matters worse, he refuses to have sex with Mary, yet jumps at the opportunity to begin a torrid affair with her cousin, Maybelline. The turning point in the story begins when Mary decides to change her will so that $100 is all her husband is able to receive from her property after her impending death due to an incurable illness. From the grave, Mary exacts a greatly overdue revenge on her ungrateful husband who is then forced to walk away from the wealth that could have easily been his.

Like many of Cooper’s female protagonists, Mary develops a keen sense of industry and independence in the midst of adversity. Her abandonment by her mother who “gave her to the orphan house and left town” (1), compounded by the fact that her mother’s sister refused to take her in because she “had her own and didn’t have time for no more mouths” (1) are the first acts of emotional violence leveled against Mary. There is also the suggestion that she receives ill treatment while at growing up in the white orphanage. The emphasis that the narrator places on how Mary acquires her name is the first indication that Mary suffers not only from abandonment but from possible exploitation at the hands of her caretakers and/or fellow orphans who are white. The narrator’s claim that “they named her 'Mary.'” (1) and that “Mary lived there, well ‘worked’ there” (1) is disturbing not only because it indicates that the mother cared so little for her newborn daughter that she did not take the time to name her,
but more significantly, it also invokes the memory of the antebellum years of American
slavery when whites took the privilege of “naming” their new sources of free labor, which is
exactly what Mary becomes for the orphanage.

For many readers, the name Mary immediately conjures up images of long suffering,
loyal, and innocent womanhood. It is the latter quality that creates the most plausible
explanation for the protagonist’s name. But her virginal state is not merely reflected by her
lack of sexual experience, it is also indicative of her social state. In other words, she has not
been properly *penetrated* by life. However, she is still an example of strong black
womanhood. Yet her strength is not so much physical as it is mental and economical. Mary
overcomes many personal obstacles in order to achieve her eventual monetary success. Only
a large amount of innate strength and good sense can explain how she comes to understand
the necessity of money and self-reliance. Her decision to purchase a home, build a small
produce stand, and sell vegetables, chickens, eggs, and other fresh items serve as proof for the
reading audience that humble or troubled beginnings do not predestine an individual’s failure.
Choices, however, do.

The narrator’s initial depictions of the men who take an interest in Mary are not
favorable. She describes them as “hanging around.” This would not be suspicious were it not
for the description of Mary’s physical attributes. As the narrator puts it, “she was a regular
size woman, she had real short hair and little skinny bow legs, things like that, but she was
real, real nice. . . . (2). Besides her regular size, the other physical attributes are not generally
considered as attractive and the reader is therefore constrained to suspect that the men
hanging around Mary are only after her money. Her kind nature only foreshadows her
eventual suffering at the hands of those with unkind intentions. Hence, it comes as no
surprise when “one of them men with a mouth full of sugar and warm hands got to Mary” (2). It is in this area of life that Mary’s integrity, self-reliance, and good sense are truly put to the test. Unfortunately, she fails miserably.

The figurative image of a mouth filled with sugar, an allusion to an old blues song, indicates that Charles, Mary’s husband, uses kind words and flattery to impress and woo Mary who is not socially savvy enough to detect his false nature. Any protective shield that she might have developed over the years is apparently disposed of once she believes that Charles can fill the emotional spaces left vacant by childhood abandonment and a life dedicated to filling the needs of others. While Mary’s ability to secure financial security for her self is quite remarkable, it is possible that this success is driven by a basic need to survive. After all, she would not remain a child-orphan forever. Love, in any form, is a joy that she had never experienced. Therefore, she does not develop the emotional or intellectual tools necessary for differentiating between false professions of affection and true love. The narrator’s figurative use of sugar indicates that Charles is over flattering, almost sickeningly so. Yet Mary’s naiveté and desperation for the “warm hands” he offers to her supercede the previously useful stores of common sense that could protect her from his clutches. Although the narrator alleges that she tries to warn Mary that she suspects Charles has “a mouth full of ‘gimme’ and a hand full of ‘reach’” (2), Mary cannot see the verity of her friends’ observations. She is too enamored by the possibility that someone will finally love her and provide her with the intimate connections that she has never had.

Charles’s character is sufficiently horrid. He is uselessly lazy, morally bereft, and excessively boastful, three qualities that clearly explain why he is so attracted to Mary. He correctly detects in Mary an opportunity to live grandly without much effort. When he
initially begins to “court” Mary, he is gainfully employed, albeit as a “go-for and clean-up man” (2). However, what is most revealing about Charles’s behavior is not that he chooses unemployment, but who employed him.

Charles worked at Mr. Charlie’s bar. The narrator does not clearly explain whether Mr. Charlie is white or black, but then again, she does not have to. It is quite probable that Charlie is not even the bar proprietor’s first name. Those readers familiar with African American folk culture will recognize “Mr. Charlie” as a popular slang that was assigned to white men in positions of authority over black men, especially those who were overtly oppressive. Examples abound in black folk culture for the use of this term. Since “Mr. Charlie” is a term laden with bitterness toward the white power structure for its historical abuse of power over black men, there is a possibility that Charles’s abusive behavior towards Mary is actually a pathological response to the inferior position he had been placed in while working at “Mr. Charlie’s bar” (2). Furthermore, the irony and parallels between his given name and the name of his former employer should not be missed. When he meets, courts, and eventually marries Mary, he is presented with the opportunity to move beyond being merely Charles, and become a Mr. Charlie-like figure, the supreme voice of authority over his weak-spirited wife. By doing so, he makes Mary his “nigger” (and I do not mean this term to be understood in the allegedly endearing sense) by forcing her into a subservient position through psychological violence. He treats her with the same lack of respect and dignity that he likely received during his lowly employment as a “go-for and clean-up man” at Mr. Charlie’s bar.
Charles’s behavior is also a validation of Janie Starks’ grandmother’s notions regarding relations between black men and black women in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

Honey, de White man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de Black man is in power, but we don’t know nothing but what we see. So de White man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see (14).

This popular scene from Hurston’s classic novel has been referenced often as an explanation for Janie Starks’s unsuccessful relationships with the men in her life. I would argue that Nanny’s words are similarly appropriate as an explanation for Charles’s foul treatment of Mary and her many years of complicity in her own subjugation.

Implicit in Nanny’s statement regarding black male and female relations is the notion that Black men have a proclivity towards using black women as intimate sites for emptying their own psychical pain. By placing black women in the position of personal “whipping boy,” black men, in some cases, are reacting to the frustration they understandably feel towards their white oppressors. Such behavior is what black psychologist Lawrence Houston refers to as “displaced aggression.” Houston finds that:

> [a] major source of frustration [among Black men] is the thwarting of the Black male’s quest for manhood. The Black male has been taught since the days of slavery to be passive, dependent, and unassertive—the exact antithesis of masculinity. . . .Since, in our society, economic wealth is correlated with manhood and power, we find that, again, the Black man has been denied. This consistent and ubiquitous disavowal of manhood seems to be one of the major causes of seething anger among Black males in the United States (108-109).

Houston’s study leans heavily towards the experiences of black men in America, and pays only nominal attention to the plight of black womanhood or the issues related to interpersonal
relationships between black men and women. However, his observations and explanations regarding the psychological problems that black men face as they navigate through America’s white male patriarchy are sufficient for moving toward a logical understanding of why so many black men introduce emotional and physical violence into their intimate relationships with black women.

In similar study, black sociologist, Donna E. Franklin, affirms that “forced to conceal their rage under an impassive or conciliatory mask in the presence of whites, black men found other ways to vent their frustrations. Planters’ correspondence and journals during slavery frequently had mentioned violence perpetrated by slave men against their wives, and these patterns persisted after emancipation” (54). Of course, men of other ethnic backgrounds can be prone to the same acts of violence against women. This is a statistical reality. But white America’s history of social, economic, and psychological oppression has often been an added factor in the nurturing of such deviant behavior in black men.

Charles’s acts of emotional aggression towards Mary could have other possible origins also. After the two are married, the narrator states, “I thought he would be working with Mary, in the field and in the store, you know. But he said he wasn’t no field man and that that store work was woman’s work lessen he stand at the cash register” (2). Charles’s statement makes it all the more clear that he intends to place the full burden of work and labor in the hands of his wife. His seemingly twisted understanding of male and female roles comes across as a declaration of laziness reminiscent of Zora Neale Hurston’s Sykes from her much anthologized short story “Sweat.” Like Sykes, Charles refuses to work. Instead, he lives off of the fruit of his wife’s labor yet constantly asserts that the house and everything within it is his, simply because he is the “man of the house.” Like Mary, Sykes’s wife, Delia, is unable to
assert control over her own life nor adequately respond to her husbands’ abuse because she is bound by a patriarchal code of behavior that mandates that she remain in a subservient position, regardless of her obvious value in the household.

Both Cooper’s “$100 or Nothing” and Hurston’s “Sweat” question the concept of gender roles within the black community. As depicted in the stories, black women, like most women of other cultural backgrounds, are often expected to accept the role of subservience to their husbands. Traditionally, men are the sole providers of food, shelter, clothing and other necessities for living. This, in theory, is what it means to be the head of the household: paying the cost to be the boss. However, black women have not usually had the “luxury” of solely playing the role of housewife. Historically, black women have worked outside of their homes also. Due to the unequal allocation of socioeconomic resources in America, black women have had to secure a job in order to ensure a functional household. Yet these women are still beholden to a culture of patriarchy that demands that they take a back seat to the domestic dominance of men. This can create a fertile environment for episodes of domestic violence in black households. Black men are products of patriarchy and many aspire to achieve the anticipated role as head of household upon marriage. But it is clear that if they are unable to fully fulfill the job description as perpetuated throughout America’s history of gender relations, then they can never truly be the head. The constant desire to subscribe to the tenets of the American dream coupled with a severe inability to fully do so can create enough tension within the psyches of black men to force them to project their own feeling of self-worthlessness onto their wives. In this way, they can delude themselves into believing that they are still in control and that black women, although working doubly hard both at home and outside of the home, can never be mentally or physically strong enough to be the head.
Thus it is not surprising that Charles could so easily hurl such mocking words of disrespect at Mary. Each time he views her entrepreneurial success at having created a thriving business, he is reminded that he was only able to secure a position as a clean up man and “go-for” for another business owner. Mary, however, found a way to progress beyond the potentially soul-depleting circumstances of her early life. In fact, her success at creating a business is apt to produce great frustration in Charles because she succeeds in what is typically thought to be a male venture, business ownership. It is her very success that attracts him to her in the first place, but he is unable to move beyond his own feelings of inadequacy to enjoy the fruits of labor that Mary freely offers to him. The narrator demonstrates her keen awareness of what she perceives to be Charles’s foolishness and stupidity when she explains:

But I notice with the prosperity he quit working for Mr. Charlie and got a car and rode around and walked around and played around! Just doing nothing! And when people go to telling Mary how smart she was and how good she doing and they glad she there, I heard him say at least a hundred times, “I could take $100 and nothing and have more than this in a year!!” Didn’t like to see her happy and smiling! I think he was jealous, but he coulda been working right beside her! When he married her it was his business, too! I heard her tell him that and guess what he answered? “I don’t need that hole in the wall with stuff sitting there drawing flies, I’ll think of something of my own!” Lord, it’s so many kinds of fools in the world you just can’t keep up with them!! (3)

It is clear that as far as the narrator is concerned, Charles is a fool. He is unable to appreciate the treasure he has acquired by marrying a kind woman who has already established the means for achieving financial independence. He understands that he does not have to work menial jobs for white men any longer, but he is not interested in building upon the foundation that Mary has already created. The seeds of patriarchal thought have been so deeply embedded within his psyche that he can only imagine tearing down Mary, as she is a constant reminder of his own perceived ineptness. He can verbalize about creating something better
than Mary has because his definition of manhood demands that he be able to do so. But in reality, as the reader discovers at the end of the story, his words are full of the same emptiness as they were when he was courting Mary with them.

This emptiness he feels is the catalyst for the frequent deluges of verbal abuse he directs toward Mary. Charles’s campaign for Mary’s demise begins early in the relationship when he initially tries to undermine Mary’s decision-making capabilities. Once again, the narrator can see the behavioral changes that Mary will not:

Anyway, Mary must have loved him cause she liked to buy him things, things I knew that man never had; nice suits and shirts and shoes, socks and things like that. I was there once when she was so excited with a suit to give him and he just looked at it and flipped its edges and told her to “hang it up and I’ll get to it when I can,” said, “I wouldn’ta picked that one but, you can’t help it if you got no eye for good things!” Can you imagine!? That man hadn’t had nothing!! I could see he was changing, done spit that sugar out!! (2)

As Mary’s business grows, so does Charles’ ridicule and attempts at tearing her down. He is no longer satisfied with making her believe that she simply cannot please him. He tries to make her question her very value to anyone, including herself. It is important to notice also that Charles takes pains to ensure that the majority of his abuse takes places in front of other people. Beyond being a necessary rhetorical device in order to include the narrator into the story, the emphasis on the apparent joy Charles receives when he is embarrassing Mary in front of her friends and customers suggests that he is constantly aware of the need to deflect attention away form his own sense of inadequacy. Any admiration of Mary that he hears is filtered through his own perception of himself as a failed man. Therefore, what he really hears when friends or customers bestow Mary words of kindness and praise upon Mary is something akin to “my wife is better at being a man than I am.”
Charles’s behavior can be compared to that of Hurston’s Sykes, whose apparent anger and jealousy at his wife, Delia’s ability to build a home, pay for it, and provide the food within it causes him to lash out at her with fifteen years worth of demeaning episodes of mental and physical cruelty. Like Charles, Sykes attacks Delia’s physical attractiveness, thus questioning her value as a woman. On several occasions he explodes with emotionally demeaning verbal attacks such as “Look at yuh stringey ole neck! Yo’ rawbony laigs an arms is enough tuh cut uh man tuh death. You looks jes’ lak de devuul’s doll-baby tuh me” (1005). Unlike Charles, Sykes dies as a result of his own cruelty. As Delia prophesizes, “ . . . whatever comes over the Devil’s back, is got to come under his belly. Sometime or ruther, Sykes, like everbody else, is gointer reap his sowing” (1001). And he does. In Cooper’s story however, it is Mary who dies. Yet in death she is able to achieve what I believe to be a long overdue revenge for his many years of abuse.

Although Cooper has stated that she does not write revenge stories, it is clear that somebody or something makes it possible for Charles to “reap his sowing” also. While the behavior of men who abuse loving and vulnerable women can be explained and theorized, there is no justification for such behavior. It is for this reason that most readers would find it difficult to blame Delia for allowing her husband to be killed by the very snake that he brought into the house to kill her, even as his screams and cries “made her ill” (1007). But in Cooper’s story, Mary does not live long enough to walk away from Charles and start life anew. Unlike the female protagonists in much of the fiction by many post- women’s movement contemporary Black women writers such as Terry McMillan, Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange and Cooper herself, Mary does not find the strength to create a new life for herself separate from Charles. Instead, with the help of a friend, she manages to
posthumously return to Charles all of the pain he has caused her by giving him exactly what he says he wants: $100 and nothing.

Mary eventually learns that she has acquired an incurable disease. Cooper never reveals to the reader what the disease is, nor does Mary fight it by seeking second opinions or taking any treatments to delay the onset of her forthcoming death. The probability of death appears to cause Mary to behave in a manner that seems most uncharacteristic. She brings home her lust-filled cousin whom she has to know will awaken in her equally lust-filled husband the desire to fulfill his lascivious needs. She also has her husband sign a series of documents that he is happy to execute as he sees such acts as indicative of his duties as a man. As he states, “I got to sign things around here to keep things goin’” (5). But as the narrator observes, “he didn’t even read them, just waved his hand and handed them to Mary without even looking at her, like she was a secretary or something . . .”(5). She even sends her husband and cousin off together overnight. On the surface, Mary appears to have lost her mind, but she is actually putting into effect the events that will serve to avenge her.

Near the end of the story the reader is able to witness the fall of Charles. Mary uses her best friend, the narrator, to create a series of situations where each dirty deed Charles ever perpetrated upon Mary is paid back to him with interest. The morning of Mary’s funeral, the day after he returns from his three-day love tryst with Mary’s cousin, he finds that the wonderful clothing that he frequently told Mary was worthless and not his style have been removed from his closet. He also finds a note from Mary that reads, “Dear Charles, They gone to the Salvation Army just like you always want. Yours truly, Mary” (6). He soon finds that his name has been removed from the bank account and is given a letter that reads, “Dear Charles, You told me so many times you don’t need me or nothing that is mine. Not going to
force you to do nothing you don’t want to do! Always, Mary.” These revelations continue as he finds out that he no longer owns the store because Mary sold it to Maybelline by lending her the money to buy it; his bed is filled with rocks which he had earlier told Mary he would rather sleep next to, and his cupboard is almost empty except for a 30 days supply of food.

The clincher however, occurs one year after Mary’s death when the social workers arrive on Charles’s doorsteps to inform him that his home is no longer his. It is to be converted into an orphan home for black children. On this same day, Mary’s best friend hands Charles a final letter from Mary that reads, “Dear Charles, here is $100. Take all the nothing you want and in a year you’ll have everything. Yours truly, your dead wife, Mary” (8).

It is in these final stages of the tale that the reader can most effectively glean the moral of the story, the message of healing that Cooper intends for her readers to receive.

The most obvious lesson is found in the narrator’s folksy proverbial epiphany:

Welllll, when everything was over, I saw him sitting out side in his car, kinda raggedy now, just sitting there looking at the house. I took a deep breath and went to my dresser and got out the envelope Mary had give me to give him one year from her death, at this time. I looked at it awhile thinking about all that had happened and feeling kind of sorry for Charles till I remembered *we hoe our own rows and what we plants there, we picks* [italics mine] (8).

The last sentence is an apparent rewording of the popular saying “you always reap what you sow,” and it clearly echoes Delia’s words regarding Sykes’s eventual destruction. But unlike Delia, Mary reaps what she sows too. In Cooper’s world, it is not only the bad guys who must suffer for being bad. Mary dies because she allows herself to be killed by what her best friend refers to as “a heavy sad heart, shaking hands, a sore spirit, hot tears, deep, heavy sighs, hurtful swallows and oh, you know, all them kinda things” (5). While much of Mary’s complicity in her own destruction can be explained by her unhappy and loveless childhood, it
is clear in “$100 and Nothing” that Cooper intends the reader to understand that Mary, like all human beings, is capable of choosing a new path at any point of her life journey. She does not exercise her right to walk away before it is too late, so she is forced to face the consequences of that decision when she discovers that her life is ending. By then it is too late to save her life, but it is never too late to try changing someone else’s.

Not only does Mary eventually teach Charles a lesson about saying what he means and appreciating what he is given, the very rendering of her story extends beyond the boundaries of the text to touch the life of the reader/audience in myriad ways. This occurs because the reading experience feels immediate. As Stone explains in her description of the ways in which written storytelling interacts with the reading audience, it creates a space where “tellers and listeners both enter the realm of the story as it unfolds” (6). The story can stand on it’s own and can be experienced as an entertaining tale. The narrator can also act as a bridge between the story and audience, inviting readers to compare their own actions or reactions with those of a character in the story. For the narrator to effectively touch the reader, two things must occur: the reader must find enough value in the story to believe there is a message to be heard and the narrator/teller must be attractive enough to warrant the reader’s trust. By attractive, I mean the narrator must possess some quality that draws the reader both to herself and into the story.

As stated earlier, the value of the story lies in its moral. The story merely heightens or validates the essential truth of the moral; it serves to make the lesson as clear as possible for the reader by creating a situation that, as Shakespeare’s Hamlet remarks “Holds a mirror up to nature.” Thus when $100 or Nothing’s” narrator states, “We all hoe our own rows and what we plants there, we picks” (8), the reader is better able to appreciate the verity of this folk
saying because he or she can immediately reflect on the what has just occurred in the lives of Mary and Charles. Such an occurrence is what Kay Stone refers to as a souvenir, which recalls that the French meaning of souvenir, “to remember.” “For example,” she explains, “you can allow a moment of a story to come back to you: an image, a sound, a feeling, and a movement. In describing this silently or aloud, the heart of the story becomes visible” (10). The heart of the story is its message, its meaning; it is what makes reading “$100 and Nothing” a meaningful and potentially therapeutic experience for those who can easily identify the story’s events, its characters, and, most importantly, its narrator.

Although Charles is verbally violent, his abuse never spills over into physical aggression. Perhaps this is because Mary does not live long enough for their relationship to take such a violent turn. It is possible that had Mary survived her fatal illness the next logical step for the verbally abusive Charles would be physical violence. This is the case in several other of Cooper’s works where the narrative exposes the black man’s psychotic need to assert his role as “MAN of the house” and depicts the black woman’s lack of access to an empowered identity outside of the role of her man’s Biblical helpmeet. Such a situation invariably creates a fertile environment for acts of emotional and physical violence. In “He Was a Man” the depiction of abuse moves beyond verbal violence, as Cooper turns her attention to the problem of physical attacks within the confines of black intimacy.

The title is the first aspect of this story that stands out. “He was a Man (But He did Himself Wrong)” appropriately recalls Aretha Franklin’s classic Rhythm and Blues hit “Do-Right Woman, Do-Right Man.” As the song goes,

They say that it’s man’s world
But you can’t prove that by me
And as long as we’re together baby
Show some respect for me
If you want a *do right* all day woman
You gotta be a *do right* all night man.

This song depicts a woman who knows her value in her intimate relationship and therefore has a healthy sense of self-worth. Her man apparently needs a lesson on how to treat her properly and that lesson is contained within the words of the song. In Cooper’s story however, Smitty comes to understand the value of his wife “too little, too late.” After several years of verbal and psychological abuse, he pays a heavy price for being a “do-wrong man.”

Smitty, in fact, is the ultimate “do-wrong man.” Not only is he abusive, his persistent protestations of manhood are enough to disgust most readers. The narrator’s explanation for Smitty’s “feisty, loudmouthed, bragging, aggressive” behavior is that he is a “little man . . . always trying to out-talk or out-do some taller man” (53). He has the classic Napoleonic complex which manifests itself in his need to prove himself to be bigger than other men. In the domestic realm however, this Napoleonic complex is amplified several times over, as the insecurity of height deficiency is refigured into a need to maintain dominion over his wife at any cost. In other words, if Smitty’s short height is what produces in him a need to prove that he is bigger than other men by out-talking them and bragging, then the violent abuse he displays toward his wife is the result of a need to prove that he is stronger than she is. In essence, his manhood is threatened by Della’s strength and size, both of which he fears.

Smitty’s behavior is sanctioned by the Biblical and social traditions which mandate that the man is the head of the household. This notion of the head as the seat of power has weaved its way into many American discussions regarding how domestic relations between husband and wife should work. The head, as the thinking and therefore independent member of the physical body, is expected to maintain the duties of creating financial mobility,
disciplining and guiding all members of the family (including his adult wife) and protecting his family from harm. He is, as is the body’s head, always in charge. Women, therefore, are forced to find methods for negotiating around these constructs, unless of course they are content with being the constant victim of subjugation. Examples abound in film, literature, music, and life of women who work around male dominion. Who can forget the popular song from the seventies that explained to women that “you gotta use what you got, to get what you want.” In the film *My Big, Fat, Greek Wedding* (2002), the main character’s mother (played by Lainie Kazan) explains such negotiations this way: “The man is the head, but the woman is the neck. And she can turn her head anyway she wants to.” A favorite of mine, however, is that the woman is the neck and shoulders that holds and balances the head. These are only a few of the sayings (probably created by women) that humorously highlight the necessity for women to find ways of navigating around male authority. What is significant, especially as this tendency relates to “He Was a Man,” is that when women participate in the aforementioned games and negotiations they are in many ways enabling and validating male power.

The narrator presents a very disturbing picture of the Della’s and Smitty’s relationship:

. . . Della loved him even beyond the love-is-blind thing. Anything Smitty did was alright with Della.

I mean even the way she cooked his meals; he had so many things he disliked and his food had to be just right. I mean JUST RIGHT. He was the kind of man who even liked gravy on his lamb chops! Very few vegetables, hardly any fruit and all that! All of which made Della gain more weight because of course she had to taste it to be sure it was just right. She could make home-made bread that would make you kill yourself. She did everything, Della did. Wash, cook, clean, garden, shop, chauffeur, watch football games, listen to him lie, pet, massage and make love too (53-54).
Apparently, Della is a very domesticated woman who revels in serving her husband. There is not necessarily anything problematic about this. However, one cannot excuse Smitty’s propensity for “ego-trippin.” Such behavior, coupled with Della’s apparent desire to freely place her husband’s needs above her own, creates a situation where Della’s is condemned to never receiving the kind of respect she deserves. One can clearly see the validity of this observation in the following passage, which is the point where the narrator first broaches the subject of intimate violence:

Now there’s always a little hell waiting round paradise and Della’s hell was that every once in awhile, Smitty hit her, abused her. It hurt and it didn’t hurt! But it seemed to do so much for him, being so small and all, hitting a woman so large, she never tried to hit him back. He would tell everyone down at the pool hall and work (again) that “I know I am!” He pranced as he told them, his chest stuck out in pride, he had a lot of that! He had whipped his woman, all 207 pounds of her! . . . all those pounds that loved him (54-55).

The idea of Della, a woman with a height of 5’7 and a weight of 207 pounds, willfully allowing herself to participate in an alleged mock hanging, with 5 feet tall and 125 pounds Smitty barking instructions at her on how to tie the rope properly is nearly comical. But Cooper does not intend this to be a joke. Clearly, she is presenting the dynamics at work of a dysfunctional intimate relationship where the balance of power is tilted too far in one partner’s direction.

Della is quite cognizant of her choice to *give* her husband the right to reign supreme over her, however destructive his behavior may become. But her behavior is no different from other black battered women who may diminish the severity of their husbands’ or boyfriends’ violent outbursts by either denying such rage even exists or appearing to be unscathed by its occurrence. There may be various reasons for such behavior. For example, in discussing the impact of institutional racism on women of color, Valli Kanuha explains,
Because most legal, social, and cultural institutions are controlled and dominated primarily by White males and/or White male perspectives, many battered women of color are reluctant to bring attention to themselves, their families, and by extension to their racial/ethnic communities for fear of further contributing to the stereotyping of people of color as pathological. (436)

Certainly Della’s preoccupation with making her husband feel like the “man of the house” is her contribution to the creation of a respectable household—one that effectively reflects the struggle to achieve what is falsely perceived to be middle and upper class American normalcy.

In the end, Della’s denial of abuse solidifies the narrator’s observation that “[Smitty] had him a woman!” (54). She becomes an extension of his ego that he can manipulate however he chooses. So much of Smitty’s manhood is invested in his dominion over Della that he is unable to function without her. Della, and her ability to augment Smitty’s ego, can be viewed as an addictive drug that he uses to pacify his feelings of inferiority. Her submission to domesticity and acquiescence to male tyranny create unceasing opportunities for him to remind himself that, as the title indicates, “he is a man.” However, he does, eventually, “do himself wrong.”

Smitty’s power, “black and otherwise,” (54) is really an illusion—a virtual reality. It is only real as long as Della extends it to him. If she ever decides to return to herself, Smitty’s ego would be irreparably damaged. Della, it seems, is the stronger of the pair, both physically and mentally. However self-deprecating her voluntary submission to Smitty is, she is his superior because both his identity and his livelihood are dependant on her. She is cognizant of her choice to let her husband feel like a man. After all, “it seems to do so much for him” (54). Cooper hints at this notion in the following excerpt:
One night when they were sleeping, someone broke into the house. . . . Della heard the noise and woke Smitty up. He lay there a moment then said, ‘Let’s go see what’s going on.’ He hollered from the bed, ‘Who’s there! Who’s in this house?’

They got up and went into the hall and there was this dope addict or something looking raggedy and holding a gun. Smitty ran past him, going to get his gun, I guess, and Della got scared and tried to follow him past the robber, who was then squashed against the wall with Della screaming at him to let her go! She must have hit him or something, he was really trying to get out of that tight spot with all that wide open screaming in his ears, and probably hoping somebody would come along and save him from his victims . . . The gun went off around that time and Della thought Smitty had saved her when Smitty came rushing around a corner hollering Della’s name, guess he thought she had been shot, and the robber slid down the wall at her feet, dead.

Since the narrator and Della are friends, one can assume that narrator’s story about what occurred is from the memory banks of Della. If this is true, then one cannot ignore the blatant falsities at work here. Why would Della think that Smitty had saved her? Not only does she pin down and physically beat the intruder, it is also quite possible that she secures the gun and shoots him. So where is the logic in the narrator stating that Della thought Smitty had saved her? It is clear that she saves him. This is yet another example of Della doing her part to support the falsehoods of male superiority. She understands how humiliated Smitty would feel if he had to accept the fact that Della thwarted another man’s attempt to bring harm to their household. Therefore, she lies and thus contributes to the perpetually unhealthy dynamics at work within their relationship.

Della’s ongoing tendency to participate in deception is what precipitates the vicious verbal attack Smitty levels against her the very moment he is forced to acknowledge the false nature of their relationship. This day of reckoning is ushered in by a series of small domestic disasters that serve to erode Della’s satisfaction with female domesticity:

It was a day that Della had not been feeling well; maybe lost a baby or something almost as important . . . Also, her special cake for Smitty had burned while she was trying to untangle something in the washing machine wringer and when she put the cake in the sink, she burnt her hand and in flinging her
arm out she hit the filled dish drainer rack. It fell to the floor and dishes and glass flew everywhere! She was barefoot and cut her foot tipping across the floor. She burst into loud, dreadful tears and ran into the hall past the sign that read “God Bless This Home” through the pink door she had painted because pink made her feel like a woman going into a romantic bedroom. She flung herself across the bed onto the spread she had crocheted painstakingly to laugh and love on. She cried herself to sleep. (57)

Each small, yet painful occurrence snowballs into an emergency situation from which Della is constrained to retreat. Cooper begins the passage by suggesting that Della’s depression is the result of a miscarriage. This is a major event for any woman and would easily explain her need to relax on her bed and tend to her wounds. However, since Della is one of those alleged “strong black women” that Trudier Harris refers to, she is able to draw enough strength to do something especially nice and domestic for her husband, even while suffering from the physical and psychological pain of having lost a much desired child. Perhaps baking a cake for Smitty is Della’s way of keeping herself busy so as not to fully acknowledge her loss. However, she could have kept herself busy by doing something for herself. Instead, she chooses to exorcise her pain by continuing her affinity for submission.

One also notices how quickly her kitchen, frequently considered to be a place of safety, warmth, and nourishment, instantly becomes an obstacle course Della must endure. It seems as though the kitchen, a perceived woman’s space, turns on her. She has no choice but to flee, as every movement she makes in this previously benign sanctuary of domesticity, results in pain. At this point, the once quaint appeal to God to “Bless This Home” found on the hallway sign, seems almost comical, if not ironic. But what Della does not realize is that the purging that takes place in her kitchen is necessary. The pain that she feels becomes the catalyst that ushers in the end of Smitty’s false paradise and Della’s very real hell.
The trauma inherent to this scene recalls Elaine Scarry's observations regarding the nature of torture and how typical instruments of domesticity can be “unmade by being made at once an actual agent of . . . pain” (42). According to Scarry, a prisoner of war is often placed in a space where, in addition to the instruments of torture normally utilized (drills, water, light, fire, guns, etc.) the room’s furnishings (refrigerator doors, a filing cabinet, a bed) and more specifically, the room itself can be transformed into torturous weapons. In such situations, torture is used to elicit a confession from the prisoner and it is deemed necessary that all semblances of civilization be annihilated in an attempt to dislocate the consciousness of the prisoner. As such, torture becomes a “process which not only converts but announces the conversion of every conceivable aspect of the event and the environment into an agent of pain” (Scarry 29). While Della is not literally a prisoner of war, she is in many ways a prisoner of patriarchal convention. While there is no literal torturer standing over Della menacingly wielding a once benign object, it does appear that she is attacked by items that are alleged to have frequently brought her joy. Her beloved kitchen turns on her and the pain, both psychological and physical, wear down the pale of domesticity that perpetually encircles her. The pain changes her consciousness and places Della into an altered space just long enough for her to view her surrounding world through a different gaze. At once, items of nurture and domesticity (a cake, washing machine, and dishes) seem to betray her as they are transformed into agents of pain. While this attack does not result in Della making an honest confession, in her weakened state she is constrained to react “honestly” to an agent of patriarchy, her husband.

When Smitty arrives home, he is unaware of the frustrating events of his wife’s day, but he immediately notices that there is a something different about his home. He suspects
that his wife’s apparent lack of interest in his arrival home is an indication that something is amiss. As the events that follow unfold, he quickly discovers that he is correct:

... he went through the house and found Della asleep and ... he got mad! He started stomping around and shouting at her about the dirt (there was no dirt). The filthy kitchen (just broken dishes, that’s all). No dinner (well, there was none, but my lord!) The messed up favorite cake (as if it was on purpose) and anything else his little mind could come up with! He never did ask her what was wrong. He kept shouting, “A man this and a man that.”

Della swung her legs around and sat on the edge of the bed and tried to smile and explain. She was still trying to smile and explain when Smitty came rushing up and slapped her twice! One way and then back the other! Her arm must have shot out instinctively in reaction and she caught him solid and he flew all way across the room, through the door and hit the wall in the hall and blacked out! (57-58)

Clearly, Della is not herself. For the first time her reaction to Smitty’s overbearing behavior is not informed by patriarchal gender roles that would prevent her from asserting herself, not as his wife, but as a human being. Smitty is quite content in his role as head of household, but that role, as practiced in most patriarchal societies, does not require that he respect Della; he is free to lord over her, to control her. Therefore, it is imperative that he immediately restore order to his household. He does not have the luxury of displaying compassion towards his wife by simply asking her “what happened?” Instead, fearing loss of domestic dominion, he slaps his wife twice, both to punish her for daring to momentarily step out of her predetermined role of helpmeet and to assure himself that he is still a man.

Della’s response to Smitty’s blows is, obviously, a reflex. If she were not in such a state of physical and psychological pain, she probably would not have reacted in this manner. The narrator explains early on that Smitty’s disrespect, abuse, and selfishness are characteristics that he has displayed towards Della for nearly a decade. Della had never fought back. But, as indicated earlier, her usual deference has been shattered. Therefore, her
response to Smitty is not censored by her desire to be a good wife or support his manhood. She is simply a woman protecting herself, physically and mentally, from a familiar intruder. Protecting herself, however, is not in the job description for a “helpmeet.” As far as Smitty is concerned, Della’s act self-defense is a breach of contract. She has betrayed the sanctity of their marriage by disregarding his right to assert his role as head of household which yields him the power to prescribe punishment at his own discretion.

Smitty is so humiliated by Della’s act of defiance, that he attacks her with a deluge of verbal attacks:

‘Get away from me! Get away! I hate you, you big, fat, ugly bear! You a ape! A gorilla! You ain’t no woman!’

‘But, Smitty,’ she began to whine and try to ease him but he wouldn’t have any of that! He got up trying move without showing his pain and got the little raggedy suitcase and began to throw things in it. Della’s eyes were big and red and swollen, she kept trying to grab his shirts and underwear from him, but he done stopped crying now and was really talking mean to her, calling her all kinds of names, sloppy fat bitches and things like that! It was untrue and it hurt her. You could almost see her drawing up, shrinking, every time a word struck her. Seemed like the words were razor blades cutting her to ribbons. This was her Smitty talking to her!

As Smitty got to the door he turned, ‘I can’t never live with you no more! You always gonna think you bettern me! That’s what you want . . . to be the man! Well, I ain’t staying nowhere I can’t be the man! (58)

It is interesting that Smitty would attack Della’s femininity in order to counteract what he perceives to be an attack on his masculinity. His reference to Della as a gorilla who “ain’t no woman” brings to mind a scene in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* where a group of black men applaud Tea Cake for finding the “perfect” woman:

‘Tea Cake, you sho is a lucky man,’ Sop-de-Bottom told him. ‘Uh person can see every place you hit her. Ah bet she never raised her hand tuh hit yuh back, neither. Take some uh dese ol’ rusty Black women and dey would fight yuh all night long and next day nobody couldn’t ever tell you ever hit ’em . . . Lawd!’” (121). 

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According to these men, as much as the light of the moon is evidence of the sun’s potency and omnipresence, a true woman can display evidence of her man’s omnipotence in her life (and thus his manhood) by the intensity of her bruises. This idea was objectionable in 1937 when *Their Eyes* was published, yet the essence of these notions of male dominance and passive femininity still persists and is evident in “He Was a Man.”

The moment Della ceases playing the role of submissive wife, Smitty can think of nothing but how to recover his manhood. Smitty’s anger causes Della to revert to her old ways. She retreats to her previous self by begging her husband not to leave her. One might think that she does not really hear Smitty’s words because she is so busy reaching for him and loudly screaming, “Please daddy, baby, please daddy, don’t go! Don’t leave me!” (58). Yet the severity of his words do manage to bore a space in Della’s psyche, and with Smitty’s dramatic departure, she finally experiences the kind of quiet peace necessary for finding a path to healing.

Instead of wallowing in self-pity, Della takes two weeks to recover from her trauma and then inches her way back into the world. She does not try to forget Smitty’s rage and unkind words. Instead, she keeps them at the forefront of her mind so that she can pull from those memories whenever she gets the inclination to run back to him. Although she does cry from her loss, it is healthy and necessary grieving. Not acknowledging the pain would prevent her from learning, and learning from the past, a process that, as indicated in nearly every collection of short stories and each novel by Cooper, is at the heart of healing. Della’s method of recovery works well. Spending time with herself, taking care of herself, and learning to love herself allows her to gain a sense of wholeness. Eventually she meets Charlie, a healthy man, who challenges Smitty’s diseased notions of marriage and
womanhood by treating Della with the respect that Smitty never could. Della manages to find
happiness in an unlikely place, herself. The goodness that she feels manifests itself in her
ability to attract a person into her life who treats her well and discard a person who did not
acknowledge her value. Eventually, she makes plans to marry Charlie and hopes to obtain the
kind of healthy domestic bliss that she desired to have with Smitty.

Although the narrator questions her decision to marry again so quickly, Della explains
to her that,

I really done learned a lot. I have learned in these few months when I been
working on a job and working this stuff out with Smitty. I know bout cookin
and not havin to cook. I know about a peaceful house when you alone in it . . .
havin your own money or waiting for somebody to bring you some . . . and
sleepin alone, or with a husband! My life aint never gonna be like it was
before . . . ever again! But . . . I like havin a husband, I want a man of my
own! (62)

Although the reader is not allowed the opportunity to witness the marriage nor the new life
that Della will share with Charlie, her last words to the narrator signal that she has learned
enough about life and her true place in it to survive whole no matter what the circumstances
of her new relationship might bring. If life with Charlie does not bring with it the happiness
that she deserves, she has developed enough reserves of strength to walk away from any
threat to her self-health. The reader closes the story with the knowledge that past injuries,
habits, or injustices should not have the power to automatically determine the path a person’s
life will take. Only the individual can do that.

For black women in America, it is very difficult to turn away from a traditional value
system that has encouraged them to protect the black man’s ego at any cost. As Patricia Hill
Collins explains, “those proclaiming that black men experience a more severe form of racial
oppression than black women routinely counsel African-American women to subjugate our
needs to those of black men” (153). Audre Lorde’s response to such concerns is “If this society ascribes roles to black men which they are not allowed to fulfill, is it black women who must bend and alter our lives to compensate, or is it society that needs changing? And why should black men accept these roles as correct ones . . .” (61). Cooper’s “He Was A Man” challenges the idea that the home should be a refuge from the ills of society only for the black man. In order for the there to be healthy intimacy in the home, black men and women must learn to relate to each others as equals, committing themselves to obtaining individual and group healing. Seeking professional help and taking advantage of contemporary research in black psychology is only the beginning. The black community must find a new lens through which to filter the concepts of womanhood and manhood. For many black women the message in both “100 Dollars or Nothing” and “He Was a Man” rings true; traditional Victorian notions of marriage and the patriarchal religious concepts of head and helpmeet must be dismantled as they clearly are not conducive to black women and men finding true love and establishing healthy intimacy.

“A Good Man is Hard to Find . . . but Not Impossible”: Finding and Accepting the Prospect of Good Love

“Don’t never go looking for love, girl. Just wait. It’ll come. Like the rain fallin’ from the heaven, it’ll come. Just don’t never give up on love.”

--“Just Don’t Never Give Up on Love,” Sonia Sanchez

It might be difficult for some readers to believe that an industrious and self-sufficient young woman such as Mary could fall so deeply into the hell that her marriage quickly becomes. Furthermore, how is that Della, an attractive and physically strong woman, could passively accept and endure such physical abuse for so long? However incomprehensible these examples may be, they are not uncommon. The frequency of these acts within the black
community explains why so many black female writers have tackled these issues and sought to explore the nature of intimate violence between intimate black partners in their fiction. Writers such as Alice Walker in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *The Color Purple* (1982) and “Her Sweet Jerome (1973),” Ntozake Shange in *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1975) and *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo: A Novel* (1983), and Terry McMillan in *Disappearing Acts* (1989) all examine the diseased state of intimate relations among black women and men. But in elucidating for the reader the problems that thwart the many attempts at achieving healthy love relationships, often these writers do not allow their characters to finally achieve "good loving."

Although Cooper's fiction shares many of the same thematic and structural elements used by her literary foremothers and contemporaries, I would argue that much of her fiction strives toward a more holistic depiction of black manhood and black intimacy than can be found in many other works of African American literature. For Cooper, a good man is hard to find, but not impossible. As discussed earlier, many of her female protagonists often find themselves in "love and trouble" with men who, for varying reasons, are incapable of giving good love, but Cooper's fiction also leans towards optimism. As much of her fiction affirms, healthy love relationships between black men and women are possible despite the many externalities that often threaten the mental health of black people in general and despite a post women’s rights movement culture which often supports the idea that the contemporary strong black woman no longer needs a man.

Each story in *A Piece of Mine*, with the exception of “Too Hep to be Happy,” serves to elucidate the problematic state of affairs in black love relationships, and even “Too Hep” addresses these issues in a major way, but from the perspective of a black man. Interestingly,
of the twelve stories included, six conclude with a black woman and man achieving the kind of soul-soothing intimate relationship that can likely sustain two of their most basic human needs – the need for companionship and the need for love.

Similar to “He Was a Man,” “Who are the Fools?” chronicles the movement of a black female protagonist away from an abusive relationship and into the arms of love. 49-year old Teresa Rembo finds the courage to walk away from her abusive husband after she realizes that the pain her husband has endured does not give him the right use her as a ground upon which he can exorcise his demons. The kindness Teresa shows her husband for so many years never yields her the kind of marriage she hopes for, but because she feels that “Mr. Rembo had been hurt enough” (21), she gives to him twenty plus years of her life. Mr. Rembo clearly has no respect for womanhood and, as suggested by the narrator, he is quite angry with women in general. Since Mr. Rembo’s mother died giving birth to him and his stepmother displayed to him only borderline contempt, he is plagued by what he believes to be female abandonment. Hence, he does not have the capacity to love his wife, nor the mistress he frequently visits. One could assume that since he did not have the opportunity to have healthy relationships with women in his younger years, he is unable to have one as an adult, but as Teresa eventually understands, this is not an excuse for the kind of physical and emotional violence he levels against his wife. In a particularly brutal encounter, a drunken Mr. Rembo breaks into the locked bathroom where Teresa is reading her Bible, tears up the Bible barking “There ain’t no God!” (22), slaps her so hard she hits her head against the tub’s faucet, and pushes her out of the house onto the bare ground. Teresa, after much soul searching contemplation, decides she has had enough when Mr. Rembo yells to her “You betta realize I’m your God! Stay out there till you ready to ack like it!!” (23).
Fortunately, Teresa finds a safe haven in the arms of Mr. Wellington, a neighborhood grocer and widower who over the years “had seen [Teresa] change from a neat, good-looking woman into a thin, nerve-wrecked, deep furrow-browed, old, unhappy woman” (22). It is clear to him that the physical change that overtakes Teresa is reflective of the diseased state of affairs within her home, yet he perceives in Teresa a “sweetness and gentleness his [wife] Angie had had” (22) and, therefore, pursues her, explaining, “Teresa, we are getting old, you are too old to keep being treated like a fool! If you want to leave that man and get a divorce, I’ll marry you and take care of you. If you don’t want me, you can still work here while you get yourself together, I’ll help you. . . . We both need someone to give our love to” (22).

Although it is several months before Teresa musters up enough strength to do so, she eventually does take him up on his offer. After her husband’s final violent attack, the narrator happily exclaims that

> After a while Teresa did get up, slowly, brushed herself off and walked away, with dignity, though bruised, dirty, torn, with rivulets of tears making rows in the dust on her face. She walked to Mr. Wellington, who closed his store and took her to a lawyer without using a comb or a washcloth or anything else on her first. Then, he took her to a doctor . . . then he took her home . . . his home. (23)

The kindness that Mr. Wellington displays toward Teresa reflects his obvious concern for her physical and emotional well-being. It is quite significant that he does not immediately bring her to his home to set up a new household. While it is clear that he is stronger than Teresa, he does not use his strength to overpower her; he uses it to help her. His respect for her is reflected in his initial offer, which is less a proposal, per se, than a true offer of love and friendship. Mr. Wellington’s willingness to simply provide her with a safe haven away from the hell that her marriage had become and his profound understanding of the need for human
beings to give and receive love is a clear indication that he is a healthy soul. Hence, he is able to provide Teresa with a healthy space that is conducive for the healing she so desperately needs.

While Teresa is recuperating in the arms of her good black man, her ex-husband is forced to wrestle with his personal demons alone. No longer does he have his sweet Teresa to help him carry the heavy load of psychological baggage he brought into their marriage. He is unable to find comfort in the bed of his long time mistress, Ms. Ginny, because he becomes weakened by an extreme case of impotency. The narrator explains that his inability to have an erection is the result of heightened liquor consumption, but his lack of performance could also be linked to the powerlessness he feels in general since Teresa took her self away from his control. Consequently, as his indulgence in liquor increases, so, does his rage. The negativity, violence, and hatred that become a way of life for Mr. Rembo eventually overtake him and he decides that if Teresa cannot belong to him, she will belong to no one:

... as he drank his gin and warm beer it was all he could think about. She was still Mrs. Rembo to him! She belonged to him! To him! Not to Mr. Wellington, not God, not nobody but him! He shouted to the house “Me! Me! She is my wife! Mine! I can beat her if I want to! She’s mine! I can kill her if I want to!” The words hung in the air around his head, echoing, from the top of his sodden brain to his sick liver and sour stomach then back to his sodden brain. He cried. Tears and snot mingled as he rubbed his face with his hands. He felt no comfort, only rage. He put his knife in his pocket and slightly staggering, went out the front door, to the corner and turned right for the two blocks to the Wellington store. (25)

Because Rembo is so invested in a patriarchal mandate that affirms his right to own his wife, he is unable to sever his ties from her. In his mind, Teresa does not have the right to remove herself from his grasp because his patriarchal concept of male/female relationships does not make allowance for such autonomy by a woman. More importantly, it certainly does not
permit such a powerful act of feminine agency. Her departure destroys his sense of manhood because it is a construct founded on his right to own and control his wife. Consequently, he feels driven to regain control over the object of power that is his ex-wife Teresa, thus regaining a comfortable, however pathological footing in the world as he knows it. Winning her back would not suffice. She has wounded him too deeply by transferring control of her self to another man. The only way that he can recoup some semblance of the manhood he believes he once possessed is by destroying Teresa. Such an act would tear her away from Mr. Wellington, whom he believes stole his property. It would also allay the extreme impotency he is experiencing by proving that he is indeed more powerful than a mere woman.

This episode with Mr. Rembo also serves another purpose. It showcases the goodness of Teresa’s new man, Mr. Wellington. Unlike Mr. Rembo who only sees Teresa as an extension of himself, Mr. Wellington recognizes Teresa’s right to be self directing when he offers her the opportunity to either marry him or work at his store while she “gets herself together” (22). The cruel misogyny that Mr. Rembo displayed toward Teresa for the many years of their marriage resulted in a haggard woman who was “always looking over her shoulders for an attacker” (20). The blissful healthiness of her new relationship with Mr. Wellington however, results in a new and improved Teresa. She is so monumentally changed by the goodness, beauty, and wellness of her marriage that her old husband, Mr. Rembo, does not even recognize her in the moment he leers down at her to stab her:

When Mr. Rembo stepped into the nice, clean, fresh-smelling, quiet house, these things stopped him. He felt suspended in time . . . but in a little more time his aura oozed into the air and he was able to penetrate the goodness of the home. He took out his knife and stealthily made his way through, reaching the bedroom where Teresa, after a morning of good loving, was sleeping with a slight, gentle smile on her face. He proceeded toward her but when he reached her he did not recognize the plump, smooth-skinned, smooth-browed woman
with the softly curled hair with one arm thrown out in abandon. He was confused. A relative? A friend? He backed out of the room, turned and stumbled through the door toward the store. The noise awakened Teresa and she said, “Baby?” full of softness and love and warmth. (26)

Apparently, the woman that Mr. Rembo needs to destroy no longer exists. This passage solidifies my observation that Mr. Rembo is unable to see Teresa’s personhood. The diseased rigidity of his belief in female subjugation and ownership is reflected in his inability to identify the beautiful vision of health and happiness that Teresa has become. There is a suggestion that at the sound of her voice he finally does recognize Teresa, but he is so discombobulated that he can only remove himself from her presence. Instead of attacking Teresa, he attacks an old shawl that belonged to the old Teresa, which unbeknownst to him is being worn by Ms. Ginny. Cooper is very clear about this. It is the shawl he stabs repeatedly; it is as close as he can come to the woman he once knew and feels constrained to destroy. It is Rembo, however, who is destroyed, as Mr. Wellington, in an attempt to save Ms. Ginny from the murderous attack, strikes him repeatedly with a large soup bone, resulting in Mr. Rembo’s arrest, trial, and electrocution.

While “Who Are the Fools?” provides a superior example of Cooper’s holistic depictions of black men, the reader is left to assume too much in terms of how Teresa’s relationship with Mr. Wellington will develop over the years. All indications are that Teresa has found a man who will treat her well (just as his name suggests), but the story ends before the reader can make a full assessment of their marriage. “The Free and the Caged” is, in my opinion, a better narrative for discussing the realities inherent when couples, regardless of racial background, trying to create a healthy relationship.
The soundest relationships between men and women occur when men are willing to acquire some of the characteristics traditionally expected to be displayed by women and women are courageous enough to adopt some of the privileges traditionally assigned to men. Many of Cooper’s stories affirm this. “He Was a Man” and “Who Are the Fools” both present men who are comfortable in their ability to be compassionate, kind, and sensitive. They are strong enough to cater to the needs of the women who seek in them a refuge from tyranny of their first husbands. Unfortunately, the reader is only provided with a glimpse into the seemingly blissful relationships that are formed by the protagonists and their new men because both stories end at the beginning of a new marriage. However, in “The Free and The Caged” Cooper provides an opportunity for the reader to fully experience the journey often required to establish a healthy relationship, especially when both parties are wounded from past experiences.

Unlike the majority of Cooper’s fiction, “The Free and the Caged” clearly identifies Cooper as the narrator. In a prologue-like opening line Cooper writes “This story started somewhere else until I discovered it had two beginnings, so I had to tell you this one also” (88). The story’s initial beginning describes the imprisonment from which Vilma escapes. The second beginning narrates the circumstances that bring Vilma and Jacob together.

“The Free and the Caged” officially opens with a descriptive passage on Vilma, an upper middle class black woman who, like most women, has never been afforded the opportunity to fully experience and embrace the freedom usually allotted to men. Keenly cognizant of the cruel trick that traditional marital expectations have played on her, Vilma gathers the courage to leave a bad marriage and “follow the sunrise” (90). She has no idea what journey lies before her. She only knows that after enduring thirty years of marriage to
an unfaithful man who no longer pleases her, raising two children who do not understand that being an adult means leaving home, and tolerating year after year of extensive “cooking, washing, cleaning and shopping” (89), she must go.

Before Vilma gathers the gumption to depart, she experiments with other escape mechanisms, such as “alcohol, cigarettes, pills for sleeping and best of all, books” (89). Vilma’s life is essentially saved by a Bible-aid book that helps her to realize that “her children were way past old enough to be responsible for themselves and had made all their own choices and she was not called upon to be there to hold a place for them to use when they needed it, and that her husband was an adulterer and she did not have to stay with him and suffer in this way” (89). The irony here is clear. Just as the Bible-aid books save Vilma’s life, this story, along with every other short story or novel that Cooper creates, is intended to save the lives of those readers who can identify with the protagonist’s dilemma. As I have argued earlier, Cooper’s hope is that Vilma’s lesson will become the reader’s lesson.

Not surprisingly, as Vilma’s plans for escaping her domestic hell develop, her need for external stimulants or means for psychological escape lessen. She effectively dismantles every aspect of the American dream she has acquired over the thirty years she has spent with her adulterous husband. First, she seeks a divorce which is her most courageous step considering how deeply entrenched she is in the patriarchally defined roles of womanhood. Her most empowering decision is when she opens a bank account of her own, with half of the money from the family account, and trades in her new car with payments for an old car with none. Every move Vilma makes is an effort to secure financial, social, and spiritual freedom from the life that has imprisoned her for so many years. Even the used car she purchases symbolizes a kind of freedom; it is a convertible that will allow her to “see more and not feel
caged in” (90). Vilma indulges in this newly discovered freedom for a year, but her sincerity in maintaining it is tested the moment she meets Jacob Harley.

Jacob, a widower of two years and father of one adult son, owns the property where Vilma pauses during her liberating journey. The property, which includes a “fine old house” (90), contains many memories that keep Jacob psychologically confined to his country estate. As Cooper explains, “his son had moved to the city and there were few visitors” (90), so Jacobs only has his memory to keep him company the majority of the time. However, as Vilma will eventually discover, these memories of Jacob’s wife, the woman he refers to as “a good woman, a good person, and a good wife” (91), become a double-edged sword that nearly destroys their attempt at establishing a harmonious existence together. Unlike Vilma, who is seeking freedom from confinement of any kind, Jacob is comfortable in his attachment to the past. Although he is lonely, he believes himself to be comfortable with being alone. His decision to remain in a country home so far away from the city, other people, and his son suggest that he does not see the necessity of habitual human contact. As Cooper explains, when Vilma’s car pulls up “Jacob kept right on pruning his trees. Cars and people didn’t pass here often, but when they did, so what!” (90). It is interesting to note that both Vilma and Jacob have resolved that they do not need companionship of any kind. Although they came to this decision for different reasons, it becomes clear by the end of the story that their stubborn drive to remain isolated from others is not a healthy state of being.

In depicting how Vilma and Jacob finally discover a healthy inroad to each other, Cooper establishes early that both parties have been constrained to turn away from the gender roles traditionally ascribed to them. Vilma’s decision to divorce her husband and live her life on her own terms rather than those prescribed by dominant society, is the first indication that
she has allowed her concept of womanhood to be reconfigured. The fear of abandonment by men has kept many women chained to unhappy marriages. Prior to the women’s liberation movement of the 1960’s many American women, whether black, white or other, could hardly con-ceive of being happy living their lives without the financial resources and/or social validation that marriage was expected to bring. As Donna Franklin affirms, “Traditional marriage is an exchange of a male’s economic resources for a female’s social and domestic services” (191). Yet this has not been a very reliable theory where black couples are concerned. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the socioeconomic realities of black life in white America has not allowed for the same opportunities for black men to provide the economic power and stability found in white households. Hence, as Franklin finds “black women [are] deprived of the ‘benefits’ of the traditional exchange between white women and their husbands” (192). It is feasible to assume however, that if a black man can provide the same kind of financial stability that white men have traditionally been able to, his black wife should be able to comfortably conform to the traditional role of a home bound domestic.

While Vilma’s husband managed to achieve financial independence and an upper-middle class standard of living for his family, it is apparent that the money was not enough to sustain them. Vilma is unhappy with the role of housewife, and although she has had the “luxury” of being an at-home mother and wife, she eventually becomes weary of the monotony and tired of being abused. Essentially, she becomes anxious to affirm her identity as a woman on terms that she has created, not society, past or present. This desire for female autonomy is not a trait of a lady as prescribed by the dominant patriarchy. But Vilma bids adieu to the conformities of patriarchy the moment she decides to “turn her daydreams into plans” (89).
When Vilma moves into the little cottage that Jacob offers her, she makes sure that he understands that she “will never bind [herself] to anything or anybody again” (91). Furthermore, she ensures that he understands that there will be no sexual contact between them. She firmly asserts, “If you don’t take the little bit of money I can offer you, there is nothing else I can give you” (92). Vilma fears the problem that might develop if Jacob assumes that, as a woman, she owes him something because he has been kind to her and provided a service. But Jacob is either a genuinely kind man or heavily invested in the past he shared with his deceased wife. I argue he is both. What is clear is that initially, he has no intention of taking or forcing anything from Vilma. This is indicated by his response to her growing concern:

“So what?” He waved his hand at her. “I’d like to have somebody out here again. Maybe you’ll stay to breakfast in the morning. I’m a good cook and we can talk some!” He started out the door. “I’ll get the sheets and bring you some fresh water (92).

Vilma’s insistence on maintaining a defiantly independent stance sets the tone for their relationship. If Jacob wants her company, he will have to live by her rules of engagement, not his own. This is important because the traditional dynamics between men and women have been nearly set in stone and are guided by the mandates of patriarchy. Yet Vilma’s mind has become so intoxicated by the joys of free living, she feels comfortable, even obligated to protect that freedom at all costs. Thus, when she accepts Jacob’s offer to stay in the little cottage for as long as she chooses, she creates a kind of verbal contract:

“You don’t know me!”
“So what?”
“So, I’m a stranger to you!”
“So what? I ain’t asking you to move in with me.” The humor returned to his voice. “Just use the cottage!”
Vilma looked at the cottage a moment. “I don’t have much money!”
“Don’t need much!” he smiled.
“I can’t pay you any rent.” Her voice was low.
“So what? Ain’t no rent! I don’t owe nothin on it, so neither do you!” He smiled again.
Welllll.” Vilma took a few steps toward the cottage.
“Now. That’s better!” He reached for her suitcase. She pulled back.
“Now, I’m not going to be no second-hand wife.”
“So what?” he smiled gently.
“I mean it! And I am not cooking!”
“So what?”
“And I’m sleeping in the cottage and you are sleeping in that house . . . every night!” She pointed as she spoke seriously.
“Alright!” he answered with patience.
“I am not going to make love with you, Jacob.”
“So what? Vilma, I didn’t ask you to.” He took the suitcase and walked her back to the cottage. (96)

Obviously, Vilma’s concern is that agreeing to stay in a stranger’s home will somehow obligate her to assume the very roles of wife and, therefore, primary caretaker that she had recently escaped. Since she does not intend to pay rent, she assumes that he will expect other forms of payment, namely gratuitous sex. Thus, she believes it is necessary that she explicitly state what she will and will not do (or should I say become) hoping that such extreme candor will be enough to ward off the influence of patriarchal dominance.

Vilma’s persistence on living a life without chores or obligation, forces Jacob to take on the very roles that she once had. For two months Jacob cooks their meals, keeps her company when she desires it, and basically, leaves her free to do what she pleases. Vilma spends her days decorating the cottage with flowers, leaves, bottles and jars, fishing at the pond which often provides a meal for Jacob to cook, or simply sleeping the day away while lavishing in the joy that rest and freedom bring. Her happiness however, is short-lived.

A trademark of Cooper’s short fiction is the conspicuous placement of the turning point. This is usually announced by a word such as “Now” or “So,” or perhaps a phrase such
as “Then, one day.” It does not matter if a story begins with the depiction of the happy, sad, or troubled circumstances of a protagonist’s life. Invariably, the reader can be sure to expect a bend in the road that will challenge or further complicate the protagonist’s worldview and force her to re-consider the choices made. In the “The Free and the Caged” the turning point in Vilma’s happiness is the introduction of external stimulants which unfortunately open a space for the destructive aspects of rigid gender roles to seep into the fabric of their relationship:

Then, one day, Jacob went to town and brought back a bottle of gin, a pack of beer and a box of candy, among other things. The gin and soda water loaded with ice was good and they laughed as they drank and listened to some old records on the phonograph he brought out in the backyard. Then the gin was gone and the beer was good and cold as they laughed and she tried to show him some dances she had done down through the years. He laughed and laughed and looked and looked. When she said, “I think I am getting high,” he said, so what?” and they laughed together. Then she was in the cottage, somehow, and he was trying to make love to her. She wanted him to stop, but didn’t feel like fighting him . . . he had been good to her. No . . . she didn’t love him in that way, but he had been good to her, two good months. Yes, she was free to fuck who she wanted to, but she wanted someone to give her love to, someone who made her star twinkle, as in “twinkle, twinkle, little star.” He didn’t make her star twinkle, but he did make it burn brighter, so she let him make love to her. So what? (97)

As long as their interactions with one another are platonic, their relationship is good. The liquor, music, and laughter combine to form a jackhammer that tears away at the armor Vilma has cloaked herself with, ironically to safeguard her freedom. It also chips away at the walls Jacob has constructed around himself to subdue his apparent growing attraction to Vilma. Perhaps this is why he purchases the liquor. But to assume this would lend a kind of sinister quality to Jacob that I do not believe Cooper intends. So far, her depiction of Jacob has been quite sympathetic. His approach to life is extremely nonchalant, as suggested by his frequent use of the phrase “so what.” It would appear that he does not want nor need anything from
Vilma beyond companionship. However, when Vilma acquiesces to his sexual advancements by commenting “so what” she demonstrates that not only is she willing to become his companion, but she also agrees to let down the armor that had thus far protected her from any unforeseen attacks on her autonomy. It is her surrender that allows Jacob to see in Vilma the opportunity to regain the life he lost the day his wife died.

Vilma, however, is not interested in establishing a closer relationship with Jacob. She is happy with their friendship even if it is not intimate. At least, that is what she initially believes. According to the above passage, her acquiescence to Jacob’s sexual advances indicates that in her quest for autonomy and freedom from the constraints traditionally imposed by male/female relationships, she has been unable to discard an idea deeply imbedded in the notion of male ownership of womanhood, which is that women are alive primarily to be vessels of pleasure and service to men. This is what is implied by her ambivalence towards continuing their sexual relations. If she is not desirous of Jacob in a sexual way, she should be adamant about thwarting his advances. Yet she justifies her acquiescence by accepting the inane idea that she owes him something and undermines her own convictions. Furthermore, she incorrectly tries to offset these feeling of acquiescence by convincing herself that one of the aspects of true freedom is that she can have sex with whomever she chooses without any repercussions. This can explain Vilma’s use of a crude expletive to describe the nature of their sexual liaison. Vilma, it seems, is attempting to make use of the benefits gained from the sexual revolution of the latter twentieth century, so she lets him make love to her, believing that a little meaningless sex will be harmless. Had she awakened the next morning, packed her bags, and departed, she might have been correct. But she does not. She falls prey to the same feelings of comfort in familiarity that Jacob soon
does. She remains in the cottage and continues inviting him into her cottage until “that night of lovemaking turned into old lovemaking and Vilma was comfortable again” (97).

Apparently, Cooper equates “comfortable” with traditional gender roles. When Jacob professes his love for Vilma, she makes a conscious decision to remain with him:

He knocked, but even as she answered, “What do you want?” she knew, and when she said, “We can’t do this, I am not your wife or your woman!” he said, “So what? You are who I love!” as he made love to her. When they were through and lay upon her, soaking in the warmth and her scent and his sweat, she rubbed his head and tenderly said to herself, “So what?” (97)

This is a mistake. Although Vilma is unaware of it, she is relinquishing freedom by submitting to the very constraints she had courageously escaped. She does not understand that the happiness she experiences during her first two months in the cottage were only made possible because she had refused to play by the rules dominant society has set for women. Furthermore, Jacob is unaware that his declaration of love is not based on a firm foundation of mutual respect. He, like Vilma, does not understand how to love the opposite sex without conforming to the expectations inherent to male dominance. This explains why there is such a major shift in his behavior.

It is not clear whether Vilma initially regrets her decision to stay, only that she feels the need to lie in her bed for several days, perhaps contemplating the wisdom of her decision:

The next day, she stayed in the bed and watched the rain dry from the leaves and the ground. She also stayed in the bed the next day and the next, just staring out of the window at the sunrise, the sunlight and the sunset through the trees. He finally came over to see if she was alright, when she said she was, he said, “Why don’t you come on over to the house? Why don’t you cook some food for a change? Let me see how you can cook.” She didn’t say anything, just looked out the window again, then he left. She rose and started packing her suitcase, then looked around the room she had called home for awhile. (97)
When Vilma decided to leave the home and life she had always known, following the sunrise was high on her priority list. Thus, the reader can assume that the lethargy she is displaying is only physical, not mental. Her intense interest in the movement of the sun harks back to her initial desire to be free. It is probable that her mind, therefore, is weighing the benefits of remaining in this new, yet terrifyingly familiar world that she has created with Jacob. Unknowingly, he makes her decision very easy when he intrudes upon her solitude, bombarding her with what she perceives to be the kind of clamorous demands that only a man well versed in the vernacular of patriarchy could make. Vilma feels that she has no choice but to depart.

It is unfortunate that Vilma is not able to leave the tranquility of the little cottage she called home without taking with her yet another set of bad memories. But it is inevitable. As mentioned earlier, both she and Jacob brought sizable amounts of psychological baggage into their relationship. It was only a matter of time before the contents of those bags would fully reveal themselves. Vilma believes that she has obtained her freedom when she escapes from the unhealthy monotony of her marriage. Yet because she has not taken the time to exorcise the demons that the memories of that period have become, her newly found sense of self evolves into selfishness. Although Jacob does ask her to “come over to the house” and “cook some food for a change” these are not unreasonable requests. After all, she has been living in the cottage rent-free for three months with being assisting with any of the chores necessary for making a household run. Jacob has willingly taken on every domestic responsibility and has asked for nothing in return. He does initiate their sexual relationship, but he does not force himself upon her. She chooses to “let him make love to her” (97). The fact that she packs and plans to leave the morning after they have sex indicates that she is aware that such an
intimate act will complicate the simplicity of their relationship. Yet she remains with him, and continues to allow their attachment to grow with each continued act of intimacy. Her fear of returning to a confining domestic partnership causes her to want to run away at the first indication that Jacob could desire a return for the emotional investment he has made in her. Although he could be the man she claims to be seeking the opportunity to “give her love to,” the kind of man who could “make her star twinkle” (97), she is too consumed by memories of her past to engage in a relationship with Jacob or any other man. Jacob has demonstrated that he is strong enough in his manhood to allow her to shine as brightly as she chooses without seeking to cast the shadow of traditional gender role expectations over her light. But it is really a one-sided relationship. Although Vilma has sat on the sidelines, cheering on his many acts of kindness, she has never truly ventured onto the playing field. Although she shares her physical self with him, she remains emotionally distant.

Jacob has demonstrated that he is a generous, kind, and loving man, but he too, is suffering from memories of the past. Fear of abandonment and the return of loneliness become the Achilles Heels that weaken him so completely that his kindness briefly transforms into brutality:

She started out of the yard meaning to come back and say, thank you and goodbye, when her car was ready to go. Jacob met her ad she walked into the dirt drive and he snatched her bag from her hand and grabbed her blouse and pulled and jerked her back to the cottage. The buttons flew, the seams tore and she was screaming at him, but still he dragged her and threw her into the cottage and shoved her into the wall, then he went out and got the suitcase and threw it against the wall.

“You aint leaving me! No one else is gonna leave me!” he said; he was crying, too.

“I’ve got to go, Jacob, I’ve got to go. You knew I was not here to stay forever!” she pleaded. She saw the fist coming and even then she felt sorry for him. Where was his “So what?” when she needed it? Why had he run out of “So Whats?” when she needed only one more? Then she lost consciousness.
When she woke up again, he was sitting beside her bed, she was cleaned and dressed in her gown, her head bandaged and there was medicine, doctor’s medicine, on the bedtable.

“Oh God, I’m sorry Vilma, I didn’t mean to hurt you. I got the doctor. I been taking care of you. I love you. I’m sorry!”

Vilma said nothing, her lips were sore anyway. She just looked at him.

“Don’t leave me, Vilma. I need you here with me. You ain’t got nowhere to go, no way. You gonna stay here with me . . . please.”

Vilma just looked at him. She tried to hate him, but was glad to find in her heart she couldn’t. She felt sorry for him, that’s all.

There is no excuse for Jacob’s violence, but the majority of the story does not lend itself to allowing the reader to see him as an abusive man. His outburst is surprising considering the goodness he has displayed throughout the text. He is still a man however. Most men born into a patriarchal culture are going to display the lessons learned. Although Jacob has not behaved in a manner that would make the reader believe him to be a domineering abusive male, he nevertheless does succumb to an abusive action that is unfortunately quite common. Jacob is not a violent man, nor is he controlling. He is simply a victim of loneliness. One could surmise that he never fully makes peace with the fact that his wife has died and his son has gone to the city. He may see in Vilma a chance to regain the happiness of the past. Hence, although he professes to love Vilma, one is pressed to wonder if he truly loves her or actually loves the idea of her presence in his life. Certainly Cooper does not want the reader to view Jacob as sinister or cruel. Her description of how he cries, pleads, and begs for her forgiveness, coupled with the constant care and attention he lovingly provides for two weeks following the attack, suggest that his act of violence was not born out of cruelty, but out of fear. The greatest indication that Jacob’s is indeed a “good” man at heart is Vilma’s reaction to being hit. She tries to hate him, but cannot. She “feels sorry” for him. And although pity
does not necessarily indicate that she loves him, it certainly indicates that she knows Jacob is not a woman-abuser.

Jacob is a product of society. Much like Harpo from Walker’s *The Color Purple*, he falls prey to an ideology that advocates violence in a situation where a woman cannot be easily controlled. After being taunted and belittled by his small-minded father for being unable to properly control his woman, Harpo sets out to make Sophia behave in a manner more befitting an early twentieth century woman. Even Celie becomes complicit in this madness as demonstrated by her suggestion that Harpo “beat her.” This is unfortunate. Before his father’s interference, Harpo enjoyed a happy marriage, but the instructions he receives regarding the mandates of patriarchal rule ruin his bliss. Instead of appreciating Sophia’s strength, he begins to fear it. He becomes consumed with the idea that her strength will signal to the surrounding community (his abusive father in particular) that he is a weak man, which is tantamount to not being a man at all. To ease such feelings of inferiority, he resorts to the behavior most common to men that are overcome by fear, violence. Of course, this does not work. Sophia truly is too strong for him, both physically and mentally, but the small gusts of power he falsely believes he is receiving while trying to tame his wife are enough to boost his ego until the next battle. In the end, the fear that breeds violence causes him to lose his wife completely.

Although Jacob does not have an intimidating father urging him to assert his manhood, he is still victimized by the same patriarchal code that advocates violence in the face of fear. Jacob assumes that since their relationship has been consummated they are more than mere friends; they are an intimate couple. This is yet another possible example of how the traditional behavioral roles between Vilma and Jacob have been reversed. Traditionally, it
is women who are considered to be more interested in emotional attachment than men. Jacob however, has lived such a lonely existence in his remote country cabin that the mere thought of returning to that place is too much for him to bear. There is no indication that Jacob is an abusive man. In other stories where Cooper presents such men, there are always clear indicators that point to abusive tendencies. One can assume then that Jacob’s aggressive outburst stems from his a severe sense of despair. Fearing that he has nothing to lose, he resorts to physical violence as a tool for subverting Vilma’s will with his own. Yet Cooper does not intend for the reader to hate Jacob. He is so apologetic and genuinely disturbed by his own behavior that even Vilma cannot hate him. She only feels sorry for him.

Jacob does attempt to redeem himself by placing Vilma in the bed and calling a doctor in to care for the injury she sustains at his hands, but this is hardly enough to undo the pain he has caused. Although Vilma displays true compassion by understanding that it is Jacob’s pain that rose up and moved him to strike her, this is not enough to make her stay with him. As soon as she is well enough, she prepares to leave again. This time, Jacob does not attempt anything to make her stay beyond “Don’t go, Vilma” and “I love you” (99). To these words, Vilma softly replies, “So what?” and drives away “to her freedom” (99). Yet Vilma never displays even the smallest amount of anger toward Jacob. The reader therefore, is not led to view Jacob with contempt, only compassion. He is after all a “good man” and Vilma found him. They are just both too damaged by the demons of the past to keep each other.

Initially, I assumed Cooper’s addition of a second ending to be a far too intrusive addition to the natural flow of the narrative. However, upon further investigation, I understand why she may have decided to include a second ending. As with most of Cooper’s fiction, the concept of choice plays a major role in determining how the lives of her
protagonists will unfold. Cooper labels her closing passage as an alternate ending, but I feel that it is not so much an alternative as it is a reflection of Vilma’s (and anyone else’s) right to change her mind. Vilma initially chooses to leave Jacob in search of her freedom, but after less than a year, she chooses to return to the little cottage. She returns to her “good man.” The narrator does not explain why Vilma returns; the only explanation given is that she “started looking for the sunset again.” One can assume that she has, once again, redefined what freedom really means to her. A woman who values her freedom so highly would not willingly return to a situation where she feels confined. Vilma happily returns because she understands that the relationship with Jacob is what she is searching for, an interdependence that is not founded on traditional expectations of gender roles, but on respect and compassion, the true foundations of intimate love. Although she initially states that she wants a man who can “make her star twinkle,” she apparently discovers that only she has the power to bring such light into her life. This point is made clear when she explains to Jacob that she has changed her name to “Vilma Twinkle.”

When Vilma and Jacob initiate settling down into their new life together, it is with the realization that the only necessary expectation is that there should be none beyond learning how to properly love one another:

“Listen,” he said, “No gin and no beer, I just want you to come here,” and she stood their twinkling.

He dropped the tools but still stood there, smiling or grinning, whichever. “But you ain’t my wife . . . yet,” he said.

“So What?” she answered. And their laughter filled the yard and the cottage and the trees and their hearts. (100-101)

Jacob has already demonstrated that he is capable of enjoying companionship while rejecting the mandates of traditional role expectations. He cleans, cooks and seeks to accommodate
Vilma’s needs with the same fervor traditionally expected of wives. Vilma, however, has learned how to separate companionship from confinement. This is best expressed by her rejection of any discussion about marriage. The concept of marriage carries with it too many rigidly defined roles that do not necessarily ensure a harmonious existence between a man and a woman. Vilma seeks to maintain their happiness as they learn to love each other, without having to concern herself with conforming to a Victorian model of womanhood that does not reflect her needs as a woman and will not assist her with healing the wounds of the past. In Jacob, she has found a safe space to find herself and the companionship she decides she actually needs. What more does she need?

Essentially, Cooper’s “Who Are the Fools” and “The Free and The Caged” extol the courage of black women who recognize their self-value. They leave abusive, unappreciative, and domineering husbands, men who must then wade alone in the sea of patriarchal malevolence they have created for their wives. There are many works of fiction by contemporary black women writers that are thematically similar. However, Cooper’s tendency to infuse her works with a wisdom-laden optimism mandates that she make room for the possibility that a black woman’s love does not end just because she turns away from painful intimacy. To not make allowances for the possibility of a good healthy black man feeds too easily into the stereotypical belief that black men are worthless, cruel, lazy, brutal, and/or lascivious. As a storyteller imparting wisdom and direction to her reading audience, Cooper ensures that her fiction makes fair assessments of human behavior and interaction. A reader who recognizes in Cooper’s fiction the voices of wise women figures that impart lessons of life and love can benefit from a story which acknowledges that there is still hope for a black woman who desires a good relationship with a black man. Regardless of the
statistical data that document the high percentages of black men in jail for various offenses, there is still hope. Regardless of the modern day label, “baby daddy,” an irresponsible father who sticks around only long enough to impregnate, celebrate, and vacate, there is still hope. But, as Cooper’s fiction demonstrates, before any woman can truly enjoy the benefits of participating in a healthy relationship with a man, she first has to seek healing for herself. She must acknowledge her pain, learn from it, and move forward towards healing in spite of it. In the end, Cooper’s stories about women “in love and trouble” are actually parables, all of which highlight the verity of an old folk expression: “When you lose, don’t lose the lesson.”

Endnotes

1 Interview with Lee Meadows, WPON “Book Beat” Radio Program, 1/18/99.


3 See, for example, Family, and “The Life You Life May Not Be Your Own.”

4 See Kay Stone’s “Stone’s on the Mountain: Crossing Borders into Story.”

5 Consider, for example, Lorraine Hansberry’s classic play, A Raisin in the Sun in which Walter Lee refers to white men as “Mr. Charlie, the boss man”; or the train scene in Spike Lee’s X, the film adaptation of Malcolm X’s The Autobiography of Malcolm X in which actor Denzel Washington refers to the white supervisor’s as Mr. Charlie.

6 See William Shakespeare’s Hamlet.


8 This kind of “and they lived happily ever after” conclusion ties in well with the idea that much of Cooper’s fiction reflects many of the components of traditional fairy tales. This might seem to weaken my argument that Cooper’s fiction attempts to capture the realism of the everyday black woman’s experience. However, I would argue that in the healing narrative, the protagonist usually achieves a happy ending because he or she has learned a necessary lesson. In the case of Teresa Rembo, happiness is not solely achieved because she marries Mr. Wellington; it is also achieved because she allows herself the opportunity to be happy even though it is a giant leap of faith away from the reality she had grown accustomed to. Similar criticisms were leveled against Alice Walker’s novel The Color Purple. For further discussion see Trudier Harris, “On The Color Purple, Stereotypes, and Silence,” Black American Literature Forum 18.4 (Winter 1984): 155-161; Cynthia Hamilton, “Alice Walker’s Politics or the Politics of The Color Purple,” Journal of Black Studies, 18.3 (Mar, 1988), 379-391; and Mary Jane Lupton, “Clothes and Closure in 3 Works by Black Women,” Black American Literature Forum, 20.4 (Winter, 1996): 409-421.
Chapter 5: The Black Family and the Road to Healing

You all know what a story is. And if you are lucky enough to come from a big family, then you’ve probably heard the best stories there are—stories of the family.

--Toni Cade Bambara, Tales and Stories for Black Folks

In Cooper’s fiction, as in the fiction of many other contemporary black women writers, the concept of “family” is not limited to the traditional nuclear family. Black people’s survival in America often has not allowed for such individualized constructs. It has only been in the recent post-Civil Rights years that African Americans have achieved the kinds of socioeconomic affluence that would allow for such familial individualism, but these infrequent cases are certainly not the norm. Attempts to force this idealized concept into the lives of those who do not have the means to achieve it have only served to hinder the necessary healing of black people in general. In the past, sociological researchers claimed to identify pathological tendencies among African Americans. For instance, Daniel P. Moynihan’s infamous 1965 report, “The Negro Family: A Case for National Action,” depicted low-income black families as a “disorganized,” “deprived,” and “disadvantaged” (Boyd-Franklin 14) unit which suffered from “a tangle of pathology” because of alleged disproportionately high rates of single parent households, poverty, unemployment, and crime. Furthermore, Moynihan reported that the internal matriarchal structure of black families was “at the center of the tangle of pathology and . . . mainly responsible for the problems in the black community (Hill 5). Other researchers, followed suit and present evidence that depicted black families as unstable and moving towards a complete breakdown.¹

In the last thirty years, black sociologists and psychotherapists have challenged the denigrating viewpoints of earlier researchers. Charging such social scientists as E.F. Frazier, Daniel Moynihan, and others with having a “preoccupation with African American familial
pathology” (Boyd-Franklin 15), they have produced research which questions popular notions of what constitutes familial viability in a given community. Moreover, attempts have been made to redefine the very idea of “family” by extending its definition to include structures more common to African American traditional structures. For example, in explaining how the traditional concept of “family” as defined in white patriarchal culture has affected black people, especially black women, Patricia Hill Collins asserts:

Situated in the center of family values debates is an imagined traditional family ideal. Formed through a combination of marital and blood ties, “normal” families should consist of heterosexual, racially homogenous couples who produce their own biological children. Such families should have a specific authority structure, namely a father-head earning an adequate family wage, a stay-at-home wife and mother, and children. Idealizing the traditional family as a private haven from a public world, family is seen as being held together through primary emotional bonds of love and caring.

Framed through this prism of an imagined traditional family ideal, U.S. Black women’s experiences and those of other women of color are typically deemed deficient. (178)

Considering the horrors of American slavery and its perpetual aftermath, it is not surprising that African Americans have often been unable to sustain this kind of idealized family structure. The private family is a construct that simply could not have worked in communities where people are forced to rely upon one another merely to survive. Whether this drive for survival has produced what Moynihan calls “pathology” is a questionable assumption. Black psychotherapist Nancy Boyd-Franklin warns her colleagues against accepting the narrow perception that such an idea promotes. In her book Black Families in Therapy, she promotes the presumption that “there is no such thing as the black family” (6). Black families are diverse; they must not be categorized along stereotypical lines. Thus, “it is necessary to differentiate between what is functional and what is dysfunctional in the Black family . . . in order to construct an accurate framework for the process of restructuring . . . (5).
It is the process of “restructuring” that is particularly significant for this study. Many contemporary black women writers foreground this notion when addressing the ills and strengths of black community in their fiction. In a perfect world, one’s family would continually be a source of strength that can be relied upon to shield or insulate an individual from adversity. No matter the problem, a person would be able to return to the family to be renewed and edified. Such sentiments are the fantastic matter of greeting cards, sitcoms, and made for TV movies. However, in the black community, several generations of separation, pain, and fear have tainted common cultural memories and frustrated the drive for survival that has traditionally bound black people together. The experience of slavery, racism, and discrimination has produced a distinct racial experience in African American culture. Thus, in contemporary society, black familial health simply cannot always be the norm for all black people. J. California Cooper’s fiction reflects such realities in its depictions of black family relationships in America. She presents balanced and honest portrayals of “the ways of black folks,” past and present. Through her stories, she examines the black family’s supposed “pathologies,” but she also praises black familial endurance and their unceasing ability to traverse obstacles—to “keep on keepin’ on.”

Many of Cooper’s short stories, especially those in *A Piece of Mine*, are tales of woe that highlight the difficulty of husbands to treat their wives with love and respect. Thus, it is not surprising that in those stories where children are conceived within frustrated intimate unions there is simply not enough love to go around and the children often grow up to lead difficult existences. In Cooper’s fiction, as in life, the people a person is closest to can provide the greatest amount of joy or the greatest amount of trauma. Family relationships, whether biological or fictive, are powerful forces that can either nourish and send a person
into the world healthy and whole or break a person years before he or she has the freedom and the strength to undo the damage done.

In presenting the issues that thwart the ability for black families to be healthy and whole, Cooper cannot ignore the significance of slavery and its aftermath in the lives of black people. Thus her third novel, *The Wake of the Wind*, presents a personified Africa as a narrating ancestral homeland who mourns the loss of her children. That initial severing during the Middle Passage laid the groundwork for future dysfunction and pain throughout the African diaspora. Thus, Cooper’s presentation of African American cultural connections to a mythic African motherland can be considered as indicative of strained black family ties. Cooper also examines the complexities of black parent and child relationships and explores the significance of “fictive kin.” \(^2\) Specifically, she presents what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as “othermothering” (178-183) as a necessary construct for establishing and maintaining black familial health. In Cooper’s fiction, these relationships are the wellsprings from which the health of black people either grows or falters. In typical Cooper fashion, the center of the story is not the challenge that the protagonists face as they navigate through the diseased behaviors that are the result of painful cultural memories. The central point of the stories are the choices made which serve to either end or exacerbate the issues that plague the black family. As with all of her fiction, Cooper promotes a person’s right to choose her or his own fate, thus paving a road to personal and cultural health.

**Return to Your Source: Mother Africa’s Appeal in Cooper’s *The Wake of the Wind***

“When life and pain and time has pressed down on you so heavy and so deep in your memory . . . it lasts, and you pass it on.”

J. California Cooper, *The Wake of the Wind*
The above epigraph can be found near the end of the prologue of Cooper’s third novel, *The Wake of the Wind*. The words are presented as if verbally spoken from the mouth of an uneducated person of African descent, probably a former slave, who feels compelled to pass on learned lessons, trials, and experiences from his or her life as an American slave. A gender is not assigned to the voice so one could assume that the words come from the collective voice of the formerly enslaved, especially since it is preceded by a statement that describes the rape of Africa during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The gender of the Teller is not important anyway. What matters is that Cooper, by writing the novel and placing its events in the mouth of a Teller (a storyteller), contributes to what Karla Holloway refers to as “woman-centered ideology in African and African-American women’s literature” which is literature that “places with women’s creative powers both the ability to create life and the ability to tell— to reveal the quality, dimensions, and history of living” (132). The predominant notion flowing throughout the entirety of this brief passage is that memories created by the institution of slavery and its aftermath have been so powerful that an indelible mark has been left on the psyche of the Teller, and inevitably on those who will come after her. As the Teller explains,

See . . . the past has power. That power BURNS memories into a heart, into a mind, so much that they leave scars there. It’s the only way you can touch people you have never seen, would love and do love, can never touch again . . . ever. Your ancestors. This power of the past makes me pass it on. Now . . . I’m passin it on to you. Now and then, mayhap you will think of it and . . . pass it on again. And again. (*The Wake of the Wind*, 3)

The Teller’s words are important because they reveal the significance of storytelling as a powerful tool for examining generations of people, especially family groups.
In *The Wake of the Wind*, the telling of the Teller’s story follows the form of the slave narrative, thus situating this novel as yet another example of what Angelyn Mitchell refers to as the liberatory narrative. The narrator clearly reveals that actively passing on the stories of one’s people is a necessary, though often times painful task. But the passage also suggests that equal in significance to the agency that one exhibits when he or she decides to pass along stories that can edify, entertain, or instruct, is the power of certain stories (memories) to quietly, yet forcefully move along from generation to generation on their own, informing the behavior, choices, and lives of the recipients within whom the stories continue. This is how the “the power of the past *makes* [her] pass it on” (3). If the memories are productive and essential to the continued strength of the family, they are valuable and cherished traits that are sustaining. However, those memories that “burn” and “leave scars” are the ones that eventually must be overcome if a cultural community is to achieve health and wholeness.

In *The Wake of the Wind* Cooper does not make a distinction between the individual black family and whole communities of black people. As presented in this novel, family extends far beyond recognizable blood ties. Community, like family, both celebrates and exorcises memories of a shared past. How individuals choose to act on such celebration and exorcism is what creates individuality among black people, but it is the past and the memories it creates that bind the black community.

The opening prologue contains the first evidence to support the idea that Cooper’s perception of family extends far beyond more traditional concepts:

I am Africa. I am a place. I am a state of mind. Hundreds of years ago my children lived free. We had our skirmishes, within my shores; even small wars that did not disturb my great and sprawling land. We were not perfect. But . . . we never left our shores to seek to destroy and rob any other culture or people; to steal the fruit of their land or minds and
It is important to note that the narrator vacillates between portraying Africa as a place and as a mental construct. As a geographical place, Africa is commonly endeared as the “motherland,” the original homeland of black people, by those who espouse pan-Africanist and Afrocentric ideologies. In discussing the misuse of the word “African” in the construction of the term “African American,” Carole Boyce Davies explains, “As resistance to European domination, monolithic constructions of Africa posed an alternative identity and did duty against the European deployment of its reality and its attempts to redefine the identities of large numbers of people taken from their homeland” (10). Because of the diverse nature of the continent, Davies takes issue with the use of “Africa” as a basis for defining the identity of persons in the African diaspora. Yet she does concede that for persons of African descent exercising the ability to define the self in opposition to the destructive identity imposed by European domination has been vital to the self-forging of a healthier identity. Thus, however mythical some African Americans’ perceptions of Africa may be, the conceptualization of Africa as being more than a mere geographical place, but rather a powerful space where the descendants of enslaved Africans can create a new frame of reference has served many of the disinherit well.

The concept of Africa as the homeland of black people has also moved many African American literary artists and scholars of African and African American studies to produce works which highlight the validity of the continuing existence of African epistemological ways of being. It is not uncommon to hear references to Africa as the “motherland” in the works of such prominent American Pan-Africanists as John Henrik Clarke, Jawanza Kunjufu, John Henrik Clarke, Jawanza Kunjufu,
Molefi Asante, and Maulana Karenga. As poet Melvin Dixon queries, “If Phillis Wheatley claims the moral authority that derives from African ancestry when she admonishes her Puritan audience that ‘Negroes black as Cain/ may be refined and join th’angelic train,’ why has there been such a reluctance among modern black poets to use cultural memory for reclamation rather than renunciation?” (23). The mission to resurrect and promote an enduring African presence throughout the African diaspora is supported by the voice narrating The Wake of the Wind’s prologue which claims that the most destructive result of the rape of Africa by the “whitish ones” was the theft of Africa’s children who once lived free within [her] shores (1). Of interest here is Cooper’s intentional use of familial terms in her description of the African holocaust. The use of expressions such as “my children,” “we,” and “within my shores” serve to move the reader towards viewing Africans, African Americans, and any other persons of African descent as members of a larger African family, with Africa, both in land and concept, as the mother. Thus a correlation between the black family and the African diaspora begins here.

The European rape of Africa, which according to the narrator entailed “the stealing of the fruit of the land or minds,” the “leav[ing] the land and people ravaged,” and the stealing of “peoples love of themselves,” was fueled by the whitish ones’ “endless greed, envy and hate” (1). As a result, the “nations changed” (1). In addition to the colonization of Africa which irreparably altered the continent and its people, portions of African nations were both extended across the seas into the new world and irreversibly separated from their origins in the bosom of mother Africa. The violent removal of Africa’s children and the forced altering of self-identity that ensued have understandably influenced familial relationships between black people. As Cooper’s prologue suggests, whole nations of people were torn from their
cultural mother and thus lost the sustenance and nurturing that only a mother can provide for her children. As the narrator, Mother Africa explains, the world she provided for her children was overflowing with the essentials of life:

We of Africa dressed for our country, our seasons. The beauty of it; free to be naked in the sun; to be surrounded with the abundance of lush green growth and magnificently beautiful animals the whitish ones have mostly all killed. . . . They are proud of their concrete streets and steel buildings, but are they happy owning them? They are only hard places to form more hard plans. (2)

Here the mother/speaker juxtaposes the glories of the world she provides for her children with the world Europeans brought her children into. The difference is obvious. In the bosom of their mother, the African continent, African people were able to breathe the air of freedom and exist in the abundance of life. In contrast, the description of Europeans and the world they created denotes a cold and calculating existence, one which even they “no longer wish to live in” (2). According to the narrator, the “whitish ones” are a “hard” people; thus life for displaced Africans in the “whitish” world would be hard also. If we are to accept the narrator’s description of what transpired during the African holocaust, then the psychological consequences of African people being separated from the nurturing abundance and natural beauty of their ancestral mother and reassigned an identity that is the antithesis of the magnificent heritage to which they are heirs could render the children of Africa as spiritually bereft beings. However, the intended destruction of the African psyche was incomplete. The narrator claims as much when she states, “They have desecrated the earth, and are enraged because they have not extinguished my children; my African people have survived” (2). But survival of the children of Africa is not the issue. The issue is how well did they survive? Did they survive whole? What are the consequences of having been violently torn from Africa (the mother), not merely the geographical place, but the identity-forming space? To
what extent have persons of African descent in America been able to recover from this devastating severing of familial ties, and produce future generations of offspring that could be sociologically and psychologically intact, especially if they themselves are not?

The narrator admonishes her children to turn away from the “hard” ways of their oppressors and return home when she advises: “But . . . I say to you, my people, you do not need sticks and guns, they do not often help. You need brains . . . and love . . . which you have in abundance as your motherland has, still, an abundance . . . of everything” (2-3).

It is here that Cooper seems to make her most forceful attempt at establishing the connection between her African American readers and their African ancestry. There are only so many ways one can understand what the African mother’s reference to “my people” could mean. In essence, she is reminding her children, her progeny that were stolen from within her shores so long ago, that they are still heirs to all that is magnificent about her. Violently striking back against the “whitish ones” or striking out against themselves is not the answer. When the narrator claims, “I am a state of mind” (1) she is referring to herself as the means by which her children can free themselves of the residual effects of dwelling within unfriendly territory. In other words, she is proposing that Africans Americans must redesign their frame of reference by undoing the common belief that Africa, as the “dark continent” populated by uncivilized people contributed little of nothing to the intellectual or social development of humankind.

The first tool that Mother Africa declares that her children will need to begin the business of undoing the mental shackles of the “whitish ones” is brains. It is for this reason that the first chapter of *The Wake of the Wind*, a novel that examines the unquestionable courage and heroism of a black family in the Reconstruction-era American South, makes
important references to some of the Africa’s greatest examples of intellectual fortitude; the cultural heritage of Egypt, Timbuktu, and The University of Sankore. The inclusion of such places serves Cooper’s desire to educate readers, especially African Americans, about all that is remarkable about Black people and their ancestry. As she explains in the author’s note, “. . . our African-American ancestors had to live, to survive. I tried to write of that survival, and the intelligence required to have any hope for a future.” She further writes, “For those who are ashamed of their history, we have a history to be proud of long before slavery raised its ugly head. We did not begin when the white man came into our lives” (Author’s Note). Cooper’s tendency to lean heavily toward didacticism throughout this novel has its origins in her belief in the necessity to educate her readers. This drive to prove the remarkable intellect of black people is not a new idea. Yet Cooper goes to great lengths to both show and tell of the keen mental power of her black characters throughout each stage of the novel.

Perhaps this is why The Wake of the Wind has not been received favorably by some critics. She is accused of being much too intrusive in her rendering of the tale. Yet when one considers the shame that many African Americans have felt regarding slavery and Africa, it is not surprising that Cooper would find it necessary to attempt to undo the mental shackles of self-hatred by showcasing the positive aspects of African and African American history and life. Thus, by exposing her readers to all that is remarkable about black people, Cooper is indeed inviting them to return to their collective cultural mother, Africa, by moving them to remember and acknowledge their grand history.

The second tool that Mother Africa declares that her children need is love. Since she earlier states that the “whitish ones” sought to steal her children’s love of themselves, it is understandable that The Wake of the Wind highlights how this was attempted. Yet central to
this novel is also how love becomes a sustaining force that kept black people afloat in a myriad of ways before, during, and after American slavery. The protagonists Lifee and Mor are the nineteenth century American born descendants of Suwaibu and Kola, eighteenth century African cattle herders, whose serene and love-filled lives are brutally interrupted by slavecatchers who steal them, place them in the filthy hold of a slave ship, and carry them to America to a pain-filled future as American slaves. Prior to their capture, Suwaibu had plans to marry Kola’s sister and thus merge their respective families as one. Kola, as the narrator explains, “. . . was married with two children. His father was a keeper of livestock, content with his lot in life; he had an excellent wife and a family of many children, plenty to eat and the whole world, it seemed, to roam in at will” (6). Here, Cooper emphasizes the pleasant nature of their lives in Africa. She then contrasts this depiction of familial bliss with the following:

They both grieved for their old homes of family and warmth, love and a future. They looked, often, toward what they thought was the direction of their old homes and Gods over long and miserable moths as days grew into a blur of time. Their work was long, hard and heavy. In time and finally, in lonely desperation, Kola was forced to take a woman (a wife?) and begin his life, for true, in America. He fathered children that reminded him of his children back in Africa. In his lifetime in America he had three wives (?) and all his children sold away from him. His grief, daily, became too huge and heavy to bear and so he died after fifteen years. . . .

Yes, Kola died . . . but he had had children and his blood was still living in the new world of pain. His blood still rushing, striving, pulsing on toward some future. (7-8)

It is evident from the above passage that Cooper is illustrating the grave difference between family life in Africa and family life in American slavery. In Africa, Kola’s family was the centerpiece of his world. They were a source of serenity for him. But in America, family brought him misery because he was unable to care for his children the way he desires.
Furthermore, Cooper’s frequent inclusion of the question mark directly following any reference to a wife, constrains the reader to question the validity of marriage among men and women who do not have the power to choose a spouse for themselves, but are instead assigned to a mate.

Suwaibu’s experience with family formation only serves to further elucidate this idea:

Many years he dreamed of and longed for his home and family in Africa. . . .

Suwaibu had to be forced on pain of death to father several children. He worked all the days of his life, dying a truly beaten, bent old man, full of hate and rage. He had been beaten many times when they sold his children and even the wife he had grown to care for. . . . From the day he was taken from his home, Africa, he was not happy One day, One hour, for all the days of his life. Not One. Not even when his children were born was he happy, because he knew they were born to be slaves.

It is interesting to note that Cooper does not place the same emphasis on the love shared between parent and child when the parties are an enslaved father and enslaved child. In *Family* the entire novel is devoted to expressing the profound attachment an enslaved mother has with her children. Yet both Kola and Suwaibu dearly loved their families of origin and a great part of Kola’s misery is situated in how much his American born enslaved children remind him of his African born children. Therefore, one could assume that Cooper is suggesting that slavery often did not allow for formations of strong bonds between enslaved fathers and their children. Since Suwaibu knows that his children will grow up to live the same life of misery that marks his own existence, he is incapable of feeling joy at their birth. Instead of happiness he is plagued by anger and despair, feelings he eventually takes with him to his grave.

So where is the love that Mother Africa speaks of? Was it lost on a slave ship in the Middle Passage or in the many years of loss and separation that were so significantly a part of
slavery? According to Mother Africa, it is in the blood of those stolen Africans that rushed into the future. It is not difficult to assume that when the prologue’s “Teller” speaks of memories being passed down, “burning memories into a heart, so much that they leave scars,” she is suggesting that those memories are transported through the blood, “rushing, striving, pulsing on toward some future” (8). For a very short period following Emancipation, Africans in America, newly Americanized by a Civil Rights Act and the 14th Amendment finally felt free to display love toward one another without the ever-present fear of separation at the hands of cruel and avaricious slave owners. Yet those memories passed down from more than two hundred years of heartache and despair did not die; they could not die. They lived on to inform the behavior and self-perceptions of those who should have been heirs to ancient cultural majesty. Stripped of their birthright and forced to ever struggle against the identity assigned to them by their captors, the rightful sons and daughters of Africa were now forced to forge a viable reality in a perpetually hostile land. The following excerpt from Claude McKay’s poem “Enslaved” reflects the despair inherent to existing under such circumstances:

Oh when I think of my long-suffering race,
For weary centuries despised, oppressed,
Enslaved and lynched, denied a human place
In the great life line of the Christian West;
And in the Black Land disinherited,
Robbed in the ancient country of its birth,
My heart grows sick with hate, becomes as lead,
For this my race that has no home on earth.

However plausible and understandable the persona’s sentiments are, they are not conducive to healing. Hate is never conducive to healing.
What is conducive, according to the voice of Africa, is love. Thus, the African mother’s call for her children to return to love—love of themselves and love of each other—is meant to inspire African Americans to move toward clearly and honestly examining the many spirit-stripping centuries of pain and learning to embrace their past, both before and during American slavery. For as Randall Robinson so aptly claims, many African Americans (whom he refers to as “history’s orphans”) are so badly damaged that they cannot see the damage. A continuous reclamation of what African American historian and keeper of black culture, John Henrik Clarke, refers to as black “nation hood” may assist with the on-going movement of black people towards self-affirmation, countering any feelings of hatred and alienation referred to in McKay’s poem. However simplistic or idealistic this may sound, Cooper’s fiction, which often presents black characters that are self-reflecting and who find the road to self-love despite the abject circumstances of their lives, is a step in the right direction. Since so many of her novels and short stories focus on black families, I argue that Cooper’s fiction demonstrates that any attempt at healing the fractured psyches of black people must begin with the black family, the cultural “off shoots” of Africa. As John Henrik Clarke asserts, “the black family is a mini-nation;” it is the cornerstone of the black community. Consequently, any salvation and healing for black humanity will begin here.

The Black Father in Cooper’s Fiction

Other than the period of chattel slavery, there has never been a time when the absence of Black fathers has been so grim. This tide of absent, unavailable, nonfunctioning fathers must be reversed. There are no easy solutions.

--Haki Madhabuti

Any avid reader of Cooper’s works will note that the institution of fatherhood does not figure prominently in her short fiction. In the previous chapter, I discussed the tendency for
Cooper to reward self-examining women with “good” black men whose kind natures provide the opportunity for black women to find their way towards healing. However, rarely is the reader given the opportunity to view these good men as fathers. Either the story ends when the woman and man finally find their way to one another or there is only a mere mention of children but no real development of parental relationships between a father and his children. The only exceptions are found in her novels.

In *In Search of Satisfaction*, for example, Jim is an excellent example of a good man who embraces fatherhood with delight. He is kind, hardworking, responsible, and devoted to his family. However, he dies early in the novel and therefore his influence on the personal development of the five children he leaves behind is minimal. Because the mother dies soon after in grief over the loss of her beloved husband, the children become orphans and, with the exception of Hossana, who is whisked away to the north by a distant aunt, they are forced to fend for themselves in an attempt to keep their family intact. The other major black woman character in the novel, Yin Yang, becomes pregnant during a one-night stand with a Pullman porter, but she resourcefully places herself in a situation where she is able to provide for her self and her son without a fulltime father. Her own father, Josephus, dies a violent death at the hands of her cruel stepmother, leaving the orphaned teenaged Yin Yang to learn how to fend for herself in an exceptionally cruel Reconstruction era American South.

Perhaps because *Family* is set, for the most part, in the antebellum south, Cooper does not create scenarios where her protagonist, Always, is able to establish a secure familial tie with a man until after the emancipation. Historically, this is most accurate.¹³ Prior to this monumental event each of her children were conceived when she was raped by her white master, a man who would not consider his offspring as his beloved children but as his
property. After emancipation, Always finds her way into the arms of Tim, a former slave who brings to her the joy of love on her own terms. Through this union a son is born whom they name Master. But, like Luke, Josephus, and Yin Yang’s Pullman porter, the character, Tim, does not receive much development. After Cooper introduces Tim near the end of the novel, she devotes a few paragraphs to him, and then the last we read of him is in the last five pages of the novel where Clora states, “Tim was long dead now, too. He left beautiful memories tho, cause Always never married again” (224). There is no indication of what kind of father Tim was before his death. The reader only knows that he had been good to Always, which of course validates my earlier claim that Always, as a resourceful woman who exercised good sense and made smart choices even in the midst of the most degrading circumstances is rewarded with a good man before her life is over. But even though his marriage to Always lasts long enough for him to see his grandchildren, Clora does not provide any information on how well or how poorly Tim takes to fatherhood.

The only novel in which there is enough character development of a father to examine his relationship with his children is The Wake of the Wind. Although the obvious star of the novel is Lifee, the reader understands early on that her happiness and ability to weather the many storms that come her way in her trek towards a better life following emancipation is due to the sound relationship she shares with her husband, Mordecai. In Mordecai, Cooper creates the picture of ideal manhood. Like In Search of Satisfaction’s Luke, Mor is a diligent man whose love for his family supercedes all other interests. Consequently, his children are successful and intact. However, because Cooper’s purpose in writing The Wake of the Wind is to highlight to significance of love, intelligence and family to the survival of persons of African descent, it is important that she create a situation where not only does a female meet
and marry a good black man, but that he be a good father who lives long enough to impart his own wisdom and heritage to his children. How else can they pass it on? As Mor states in the novel’s closing pages, “Well, it’s some fools in every family, but there ain gonna be too many in ours. I bet. Lets me and you holler in the wind to our future blood, say, ‘Don’t ya’ll forget us. We are how you got here!’” (372). Clearly, Cooper intends for this novel to be, among other things, a testament to the endurance of the black family during some of the most trying circumstances. Thus, it is important that there be a strong father figure. Without him, (if say he dies early in the novel or is terribly foolish) it is probable that his children, who figure quiet prominently in the novel, might not turn out to be the upstanding citizens that they become. In order to prove that the children of Africa have within them an abundance of brains and love as the prologue’s Mother Africa contends, it is important that both the novel’s protagonists and their progeny display these characteristics. How else can Cooper’s readers, particularly African Americans, be made to believe this about themselves?

Unlike Cooper’s The Wake of the Wind, her stories do not provide many excellent examples of healthy father-child relationships. Instead, we see that the tendency to kill off fathers early or create scenarios where the father is of little consequence is the preferred manner for presenting such relationships. The question is “why?” Where are the good Daddy figures? What does this mean in terms of my contention that Cooper intends for her fiction to instruct, guide, and edify her readers? What of Cooper’s admission that she “writes for those who need to know”?14

While the majority of Cooper’s fiction presents black women as central characters, there are a few stories where one finds a black male protagonist. “No Lie” from Cooper’s collection The Matter is Life is one such story. Here the she provides the reader with an
example of how a black man becomes a so-called “dead-beat dad” and the consequences of such behavior on himself and the black community. The central character sheds new light on the phrase “papa was a rolling stone” as he meanders through life literally dropping his seed whenever and wherever he can. The extreme narcissism that he exhibits is enough to make any female reader rethink her relationship with a man, especially if she has hopes of creating a family with him. While the concept of family ties is not central to this story, the consequence of lacking such ties is.

In an essay that theorizes the concept of black masculinity, Arthur Flannigan Saint-Aubin posits, “Masculinity leans on sexuality. In other words, in men sexual expression is developmentally critical to achieving self-worth and autonomy through gender identity” (1054-1073). If this is true, then what occurs when the ideas that inform the gender identity that a man attempts to achieve are skewed? This appears to be the case in “No Lie.” The protagonist acts out a concept of manhood passed on to him by male community elders, but it is that very idea of manhood that Cooper critiques. The narrator is clearly preoccupied with sex, not merely accessing it, but the very act itself. His unceasing search for new sexual territory becomes pathological behavior, as he systematically brings pain and rage into the hearts of many women. What is most disturbing, however, is the chaos his irresponsible and narcissistic behavior undoubtedly brings into the lives of the many children he fathers but denies before they are even born. Most people will not argue that many problems will arise when a man chooses to exercise a need to express himself sexually until he has achieved enough self-worth and autonomy to make him feel like a real man. But when children are involved, individual problems can become generational legacies, and thus the need for healing.
“No Lie” opens with the narrator’s admission that he used the years of his life incorrectly: "I know I could use a couple hundred years more, cause the time you do get, ain’t nothing but enough to show you what oughta have done with the time you done already had. Then you be done got to the end of your life and ain’t had time enough to really, really use what you done learned. No Lie!” (131) The irony is that the narcissistic undertones that vividly mark his rendering of his life story suggest that he has learned nothing from the many mistakes he has made. And yet the reader cannot help but understand that his decision not to invest in family is the reason he has been relegated to a cold and lonely existence, regardless of the many children he begot.

At issue in the story is the narrator’s “hypersexuality.” It is his supercharged sexual behavior that causes him to make such statements as “I learned about sex at a late age, bout eleven or twelve years old. I took to it right away! When I got to be bout nineteen or twenty years old I was Jamming everything would stand still long enough” (132). The humor here is obvious. However, what is not humorous is the possibility that his first experiences with sex were not pleasant. Although there is no concrete indication that he was sexually violated, there is the suggestion that his morality is compromised early on by the elders of the community. One could surmise that his clearly misogynist attitude toward women and his inability to extend love and affection to his children is the result of some unresolved traumatic issue from his childhood. In “it’s a dick thing,” a chapter from her latest collection of essays, bell hooks explains:

Many womanizing black males have experienced traumatic sexual abuse in childhood. It scars them for life. And when they receive the message from the culture that real men should be able to endure abuse as a rite of passage and emerge with their sexual agency intact, there is no cultural space for them to
articulate that they were sexually abused, that they are damaged and in need of healing.  

Certainly the narrator does not receive healthy assistance from the men of the community. It is clear from their poor advice that they are quite complicit, if not in some way responsible for the narrator’s lack of respect for womanhood:

I had done learned the cardinal rules from them old men, and some fathers, who tell all the young boys how to grow up to get to be smart young men. They tell you all kind of things. I can’t remember all of em, but some things was, ‘You don’t need nothing fat but a bankroll.’ Or “you don’t need nothing black but a Cadillac!” Even “You don’t never fool with nothing old but gold! And ‘Don’t never fool with no yellow woman, they evil. They sleep with their fists balled up! And “Aint nothing right about white women but their money!” Or “If they brown, keep em down!” All such a stuff like that forms many a boy’s education when it comes to women. We learn it from the old men almost while we takin milk from our mama’s breast. (132)

It is important to notice here that while the narrator mentions learning from some fathers, he makes no mention of having learned anything from his own. In fact, the only parental figure named in the story is his mother. But apparently her influence over him is negligible compared to that of “them old men.” In *We Real Cool*, bell hooks references John Bradshaw, a therapist who theorizes that sexual abuse can take the form of “physical sexual abuse, overt sexual abuse (voyeurism, exhibitionism) or covert sexual abuse (usually through sexual talking, like a grown man calling women whores or cunts). . . .” (81). It is possible that the narrator’s compulsive need to “Jam” everything can be explained by a traumatic response to the misinformation he receives from the community elders at a fairly young age. However benign their intentions are they only do him a disservice because they validate the idea that women are commodities that a man can use as he chooses. Clearly, hooks would label the advice the narrator receives as sexually abusive, especially since, by the narrator’s own
admission, it is heeding the misinformed words of the community elders that leads him down a road of sexual addiction and unceasing episodes of child abandonment.

Of course, the narrator’s penchant for sexual conquest does not fully explain the lack of concern and responsibility he feels for the children who are produced through these many unions. It is not improbable that there are many homes in black America where a healthy and loving black father exists. But the general consensus is that this is not the norm.¹⁶ Referencing the U.S. Bureau of the Census, sociologist Jennifer Hamer warns “The well-being of African American children and their relation to fathers creates more alarm when we consider that if current trends continue, over 85 percent of African American children will spend some portion of their childhood ‘fatherless’ (3).  Black families, like most American families, are dysfunctional.  In black families however, the absence of the father is often times viewed as both the greatest cause and the clearest evidence of familial dysfunction.  As Haki Madhabuti observes:

One need not go back over the statistics detailing the decline of Black children born into two-parent households. The figures do not speak well of the Black community.  Marriage, whether “legal” (sanctioned by the courts), or common law (people deciding to live together without legal documents), is on the decline.  However, the babies do not stop coming, and the music and love so badly needed in the rearing of children are disappearing quickly in the Afrikan American community. (187)

Like many other persons who have a vested interest in the physical, social, and mental state of black people, Madhabuti views the decline of functionality in the black community as having a direct link to the demise of the two-parent household.  Specifically, he believes the growing rate of absent black fathers to be one of the greatest concerns that plague the black community: “Stable families and communities are absolutely necessary if we are to have productive and loving individuals. . . . Fathers are the missing link in the lives of young
Afrikan American. In an increasingly dangerous and unpredictable world, absent fathers add tremendously to the insecurity of children” (187,189).

If we are to accept Madhabuti’s take on the “hows” and “whys” of black family dysfunction, then the protagonist’s behavior is typical. He is simply insecure because he did not grow up in a family where two parents governed his socialization into the community. The problem is that his refusal to be a “dad” to the children he fathers is possibly a replication of his own father’s behavior. Cooper does not reveal to the reader the whereabouts of the narrator’s father. We do not know whether he is alive or dead. However, his absence indicates that the narrator is even more at the mercy of “those old men” because there is no possibility for him to receive positive guidance from a male authority figure. Furthermore, if his father is alive and has abandoned him, then the narrator is exhibiting a learned behavior that may carry on into future generations. If this is true, what is necessary to bring an end to such a community-destroying legacy? Where does healing begin?

Unlike Madhabuti, who clearly believes that the salvation of the black family, and thus the black community, lies in marriage and the resurrection of responsible black men, bell hooks argues that this is nothing more than an uninformed myth. Her take on this issue is that:

> When black pundits, whether political figures or intellectuals, talk about the black family, they too seem to buy into the romantic myth that if only there was a black man in the house life would be perfect. Like, children, who know no better, they refuse to accept the evidence that there are plenty of homes where fathers are present, fathers who are so busy acting out, being controlling, being abusive, that home is hell, and children in those homes spend lots of time wishing the father would go away. The father-hunger these children feel is as intense as the father-hunger children in fatherless homes feel. Patriarchal fathers are not the answer to healing the wounds in black family life. Ultimately it is more important that black children have loving homes than homes where men are present. (We Real Cool 102)
Unfortunately, Cooper does not provide enough background information to determine whether the narrator’s family of origin is a loving one. What hooks suggests however is that the children that the narrator abandons will only have a chance if the parental authority, usually the mother, gives them one. This means providing a secure and loving environment where the children are acknowledged and wanted. In hooks’s view, boys who are raised in a loving environment, even if their fathers have abandoned them, can grow into emotionally healthy men. Emotionally healthy men are less likely to abandon their children and the cycle of absent fathering can be broken.

We can only surmise that some circumstance must have created the selfish narcissist narrator of “No Lie.” As mentioned earlier, it is possible that his father abandoned him and that he was subsequently introduced to poor models of black manhood. Yet Cooper’s juxtaposition of the narrator and his older brother suggests that no matter what the early circumstances of one’s life are, one does not have to continue unhealthy legacies or react destructively to childhood trauma. As with her many stories that star female protagonists, Cooper uses “No Lie” to promote the idea that to be a happy and productive human being, one must not only exercise the right to make life choices, but must also choose wisely. In this way, Cooper does not seem to fully endorse Madhabuti nor hook’s theories regarding black father abandonment, but instead creates a tale in which both theories are in many ways blended.

Cooper makes it clear in the earlier moments of “No Lie” that the narrator’s older brother does not choose the same path. Instead of heeding the injurious advice of the “them old men and some fathers” (132), he correctly laughs at them as if he understands that the very sensibilities that could create such ridiculous nonsense is not worthy of earnest
acknowledgement. As stated earlier however, the narrator “listened” and “learned” (132). As the story moves along, we discover that the older brother decides to search for a “good” girl,; that is, a woman who does not easily engage in sexual relations with men and will thus inspire the brother to happily enter into marriage, which will in turn provide the kind of stability and fidelity that Madhabuti suggests is the salvation of black family life. But the narrator sees such women as boring and worthless. As he queries, “What you gonna do with a good girl?” (133). Instead of seeking the comfortable arms a woman that he can love for a lifetime, he dubs his penis “Beau Jam”(132) and sets out to sexually conquer as many women as he possibly can. These brothers come from the same household, but their understanding of the dynamics between men and women are in direct opposition. The reader therefore cannot know whether the poor advice of the old men or the lack of an in-home father is the true cause of the narrator’s decision to embrace a lascivious life. We only know that since his brother does not, he does not have to either.

Eventually the brother marries the “good” girl he finds and settles down to “havin babies” and “tryin to go to college” (136), but as the narrator sees it, “he wasn’t havin no fun!” (136). The narrator spends the majority of his young adult years pursuing new sexual interests. During this period he contracts a sexually transmitted disease and engages in a homosexual affair with a man he surprisingly seems to adore. This episode is rather bewildering and unexpected as the reader is left to wonder whether Cooper is suggesting that his inability to find a woman to love is grounded in a deep-seated denial of his own homosexual inclinations or if he is so super sexed that he will seek sexual gratification anywhere he can. Perhaps he uses sex with women as a mechanism for proving to himself
and society that he is a “real” man. Certainly his explanation for engaging in such relations
denotes that he truly cherished the experience:

he was one of the sweetest, tenderest persons I ever knew. It felt a little
strange, cause I am a man! But . . . when I held him in my arms, I didn’t feel
like I was holdin no man. I felt like I was holdin a person, a tender person with
needs, within love in his heart. A sacred, tender, little person, with weaknesses
just like everybody else. Desires too. Could he help what he wanted? (141)

These are the kindest words that the narrator bestows upon anyone in the story. Yet this
relationship is the only one that he “just didn’t feel right about” (141). He then continues with
his sexual conquests of women.

After conceiving a child with a woman who threatens to sue him for child support, he
abandons that child also and returns to his hometown. Here he finds that his older brother has
not only acquired a large home, which is indicative of the plush comfortable life he has wisely
created for himself, but two of his children are in college and have children of their own.
Although the narrator calls his brother and his wife fools for “growin old before their time”
(141), their obvious good fortune prompts him to seek out the children he had long ago left
behind. He discovers however, that the mothers he abandoned have found other men to take
on the responsibility of fathering his children and are not happy at his unannounced return. In
fact, they will not even discuss his children with him until he satisfies their demands for back
pay in lieu of the many years of child support that he neglected to provide. Really, who can
blame them? Hooks, however, might argue that this kind of behavior on the part of the
abandoned mother is not beneficial to the health of the black community:

I hear black folks whose fathers have failed to give adequate recognition
proudly testify that they refuse to forgive those fathers later on when they
come seeking to make amends. Often, absent fathers will reappear late in life
when they are sick or dying. Yet their longing for reconciliation still matters
and should be seriously considered. It is clear that we hunger for moments of
reconciliation and reunion because forgiveness, reestablishing connections, or forging bonds that were never present helps us all heal. *(We Real Cool* 109-110)

It is important to note that hooks does not argue that such reconciliation should be mandatory. She says it should be considered. In the case of the “No Lie’s” narrator, true reconciliation might not be possible. He gives up much too easily and does not even consider making amends to the mothers. Instead, he blames them for keeping him from his children and “hope[s] they learn someday that they mama stopped them from knowin their own daddy” (142). By the time the narrator realizes the errors of this life it is too late. While his older brother and other families he observes “got something of their own” with “grankids comin over to visit them, or inviting them over for the all the holidays and rememberin their birthdays and Mother’s Day” (143), he has nothing but memories of foolish fun that cost him a comfortable life in his old age. He discovers much too late the importance of being an integral part of family. Where he once spent his days searching out the next woman who would help him feed his Beau Jam (which old age has forced him to rename “Beau Jelly”), he now spends his days searching for the next family from whom he can receive “them holiday invitations cause that’s when you get to really eat all that good food and be round a family” (143).

By the end of the tale, the reader may nearly believe that the narrator’s life story has taught him a much needed lesson about the importance of family in the life of every person. We want to believe that he understands that abandoning one’s offspring and the women who bear them are dishonorable acts which can only lead to emotional poverty and cold lonely nights. But this is not the case. The closing paragraphs of the narrative prove that the narrator’s narcissism is unceasing:
Yea . . . time is a great, big, long thing and mine is all used up. Now when I done learned how to use it. No lie. I’d get me a young girl and have plenty babies. I’d stay round long enough to let them know I was their daddy fore I left. Then she couldn’t never stop them from knowin me. Then I’d have somebody to love me. I deserve it! I ain’t never done nothing to harm nobody! Just wanted to share love, is all. (145-146)

While his words are disappointing, one cannot help but to feel remorse for a person whose ignorance is so astounding. Because the narrator places so little emphasis on the factors that led him to his belief system, it is difficult to determine what an appropriate reaction to his sad commentary on fatherhood should be. One approach might be to reference the findings of sociologists such as Donna Franklin. Franklin would argue that the narrator’s behavior is actually his subconscious effort to finally separate from his mother. This argument is grounded in her explanation that:

A male’s attitude toward women is deeply rooted in how he experienced his female caregivers as a child. In order for a boy to develop into a man, he should ideally give up his attachment to his first love—his mother. Part of the process is learning how to identify with the male parent. If the father is either absent or remote, he will not be able to direct the boy away from the mother. What results is the unfinished business of separation from the mother, and this often leads to deep-seated antagonism toward women later in life. (199-200)

Although we know little about the narrator’s childhood, we can assume that his father was absent because he is not mentioned. Only the mother is mentioned, which means that besides the ill-advice of the “old men” there was no male authority figure who wielded enough power to institute the kind of mother-son separation that Franklin declares is necessary. While there is no mention of the narrator physically abusing women in an effort to gain dominion over them, he clearly harbors much misogynistic aggression that manifests itself in his descriptions of his female conquests and his distain for the idea of marriage. Unfortunately, while the
women he unleashes his frustration upon are no doubt the recipients of much pain, the true victims of his rage are not his female conquests but the resulting children he abandons.

Psychologist Naim Akbar would claim that in order to determine the origins of the narrator’s behavior, one must go deeper into his psyche than memories of his mother. Commenting on the very phenomena that is central to “No Lie,” abandoning fathers, Akbar states:

African American manhood [during slavery] was defined by the ability to impregnate a woman and the degree of his physical strength. . . . Today, in African-American communities around America, we carry the mark of the strong-armed stud from slavery. He occurs as the modern-day pimp or the man who delights in leaving neglected babies dispersed around town. He is the man who feels that he is a man only by his physical, violent or sexual exploits. He leaves welfare or chances to father his children—and he fathers his “ride,” his “vines,” or his “pad.” This peculiar behavior is often characterized as a racial trait attributable to some type of moral weakness in African-American people. Such conclusions fail to identify the real origin of such traits. Such family irresponsibility does not occur among African people who have not endured the ravages of slavery.¹

The similarities between the dysfunctional black man that Akbar describes and “No Lie’s” narrator are remarkable. The narrator’s obvious predilection for leaving children before they are born has already been observed. But the narrator also displays a tendency to be abnormally excited by his physical attributes. For example, he dubs his penis “Beau Jam” and spends a good portion of the narrative commenting on his fondness for it, discussing his penis as if it were a separate, living entity with a mind and a hunger of its own. He delights in his ability to dress well, commenting at one point on how he well he could dress to impress: “I member I had on some pale, pale yellow gaber dine pants, clean and sharp. Had a pair of Stacy Adams shoes such a light tan color they just seem to match them pants perfectly. Had on a green silk shirt with my ascot. Yea, I wore them! Seen em in a magazine and liked em,
so I got some. I had money” (138). He also values living comfortably: “Had a good job, a nice apartment. Furnished it off to a living T and I LIVED! You hear me? I lived!” (136). Instead of using his resources to take care of the children he physically fathers, he places his emotional attention towards satisfying his voracious sexual needs, perfecting his “vines” (clothing) and furnishing his “pad” (home). Cooper also makes a clear distinction between the narrator’s scrupulous older brother’s drive to own a home and the narrator’s contentment with renting an apartment. Thus she underscores the narrator’s neurotically irresponsible nature even further.

The similarities here are so striking that a person might wonder if Cooper referenced Akbar’s theory while conceiving “No Lie’s” narrator. Viewing the narrator’s behavior through the lens that Akbar’s theory provides validates my earlier observation that Cooper’s intent in creating the voice of Africa in The Wake of the Wind’s prologue is to assist with bringing an end to such phenomena as family-abandoning black men. According to Akbar, this is merely one of the many manifestations of psychological dysfunction that resulted when Africa’s children were violently severed from her.

In the present age of talk shows such as Jerry Springer and Maury Povich, where the hosts continue to garner fame by exploiting the traumatic realities of what the popular rap group Outkast refers to as “baby mama drama”—that is, circumstances where children are born into situations where the parents are not married and have no intentions of doing so—most people know or know of men who exhibit behaviors that parallel those of “No Lie’s” narrator. This problem within the black community is not new, and all signs indicate that things are not getting any better. So why read about it? What purpose could Cooper’s story possibly serve in the lives of her readers? What can Cooper’s readers glean from her
depiction of this modern day Narcissus, especially since, unlike many of her other stories, this character does not seem to learn any life-altering lessons that change his perception of the world and his place in it? He does not find the path to healing.

Like many works by contemporary black women authors, Cooper’s “No Lie” is an attempt to bring to light one of many issues that prevent black people from piecing together the fractured remnants of a painful past. The path to healing for African Americans lies in discovering new ways to make themselves more and more whole. To do this all Americans, but especially African Americans, must confront the problems and fully acknowledge and understand their origins. “No Lie” provides more than humor-filled entertainment. It provides possible insight into why some black men abandon their families and what these men feel about the act. This can only help. Exposure forces acknowledgement, acknowledgement leads to understanding, and understanding is the first step towards healing. As bell hooks so eloquently affirms, “Confronting their childhoods and early relationships, looking at what they were taught and how the lessons learned affected their sense of themselves and others, wounded black males can begin to heal the hurt, to come out of isolation and let themselves live again.” This is true for black women too. Healing the pain also requires forgiveness and forgiveness can be the result of understanding “why”?

Black Motherhood: Sometimes the Burden, Always the Blessing

If it’s not one thing, it’s ya’ mother.
--Wynona Judd, Interview on Oprah Winfrey Show

Although quoting the comical observations of Wynona Judd, a white female country music superstar, might seem to be an odd way to open a discussion on the depiction of black
motherhood in the fiction of a black female writer, I believe that Ms. Judd’s observation regarding the complex nature of her relationship with her mother to be a reflection of an important universal issue. When Wynona Judd spoke these words to Oprah, she had just begun to recount the myriad ways that her mother had influenced and continues to influence her life, both beneficially and detrimentally. Not many women, regardless of cultural background, would disagree with this notion. But when this same reality is filtered through the realities of black life in America the issues become even more complex, and certainly more problematic. The traditional notion of women as natural caregivers is turned upon its head in the essays of several black women literary critics and writers who argue that this concept—grounded in a Victorian era notion that true women long to be nurturing mothers and doting wives—is not only frequently false but also dangerous. Wynonna’s mother, Naomi Judd, a southern-bred white woman and heir, therefore, to these extremely Eurocentrically framed ideologies, made many injurious mistakes attempting to live up to the model of womanhood created for her. What, then, for the black woman whose historical, social, and physical realities may not have allowed even the attempt?

This is the question that much of Cooper’s fiction addresses. Like several other contemporary black women writers, Cooper often presents women characters who are unable to reach self-actualization because of the responsibilities that motherhood necessarily entails. The debilitating intersections of race, class, and sex in the lives of these women, are, of course, the major factors that contribute to the predicament that motherhood places them in. Single parenting due to abandoning men is also a major factor that creates a problematic existence for black women in Cooper’s fiction. However, although Cooper does not shy away from presenting the difficulties that are often intrinsic to black motherhood, she seems to be
more interested in creating solutions and alternative outcomes. Unlike Mem, from Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), who is murdered by her jealous husband, Cooper’s mothers rarely meet such a deadly fate at the hands of black men. There are a few exceptions. For example, in *A Piece of Mine*’s “A Jewel for a Friend” Pearl, whose name is a reflection of what the narrator, Ruby, describes as “frail and innocent” and “smooth and weak,” is eventually killed by her abusive husband. Like many of Cooper’s other short stories where the central focus is male/female relationships, the presence of children is inconsequential. It is clear that Cooper includes Pearl’s nameless children because she intends to highlight the difference between Ruby’s children and Pearl’s. Because Ruby is strong willed and was raised in a healthy and loving household, she attracts a man who is good to her in every respect and bears children who grow up to be healthy, strong, and productive. Pearl, however, grew up in a home where her passive mother was physically abused and eventually murdered by her father. As Ruby remembers, “Her mama kissed her daddy’s ass til he kicked hers on way from here!” (118) It is no surprise then that Pearl would attract a man who reveled in perpetrating emotional and physical violence against her. In one of the few references to the children that Pearl bears Ruby explains, “Son was just like his daddy and daughter was frail and sickly. I think love makes you healthy and I think that child was sickly cause wasn’t much love in that house of Pearl’s, not much laughter” (120). So, while women in other stories are able to find the strength to walk away from “no account” men, Pearl is presented as being both weak in body and in spirit. Hence, she does not have the strength to save herself from her husband, nor to save herself *for* her children. And even after her best friend, Ruby edifies her soul by caring for her children when needed, talking candidly with her about the necessity of walking away from her miserable life, and even
providing her with physical love during an impromptu homoerotic scene where Pearl finds sexual gratification in the arms of her oldest and dearest woman friend, Pearl is still destroyed by her husband. In the end, this is not a story about mothers. It is a story about women friends. The presence of children is nearly akin to props on a stage.

Because there are few references to children, their presence does not appear to complicate or in many ways alter the lives of black women in stories where motherhood is not the central focus. However, when Cooper does decide to take on the institution of motherhood, she makes it quite evident, as the stories are often heavily laden with references to black mother/daughter relationships. Invariably, the initial pictures Cooper paints are not pretty ones. Most of these mothers are poor, exhausted, and/or abandoned women who are relegated to a life of underclass citizenship. Their daughters are always in danger of journeying down the same road and yet somehow a way is always made for them. Sometimes they make it themselves in spite of or because of their mother’s influence. Sometimes a friend or what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as an “othermother” takes the reins and actively leads the way. But the most compelling and memorable instances in Cooper’s fiction of black families “making a way out of no way” are when daughters act as their mother’s savior, single-handedly ending generational legacies of pain and struggle.

Mothers Healing Daughters

In Black Feminist Thought, Patricia Hill Collins devotes an entire chapter to black women and motherhood. Here she elucidates for the reader the many intricate elements involved in the relationships between black mothers and their children, especially their daughters. According to Collins, “Black motherhood can be rewarding, but it can also extract high personal costs.” Her observations echo those of many writers who acknowledge that to
be black, a woman, and a mother is no easy task. Still, many black mothers take up the cause of protecting their daughter’s psyches with a ferocity that is unmatched. Because of their guidance and the examples that they set, their daughters are able to overcome many obstacles and succeed despite the many forces that would serve to hinder their efforts or the fact that their mothers could not.

Cooper’s fiction provides several examples of such women. For example, in “The Magic Strength of Need” from the collection *Homemade Love*, Burlee is the seventh child to a woman who is clearly physically exhausted, but has no break from the poverty of her life in sight. Burlee is, according to the narrator, extremely ugly. Of course, the narrator also goes to great lengths in explaining that “ugly” is a false concept created by man because, as the saying goes “there is somebody for everybody.” However much Burlee’s mother loves her daughter, it is clear that she understands that ugliness and empty pockets do not make for an attractive package. Although she recognizes the need to shower her daughter with as much love as she can muster, she too falls prey to societal constructs that dictate what beauty is and is not. Clearly this is what the narrator means when she states “Anyway, Burlee . . . ugly. I mean ugly! Even her mama knew that” (118). When her mother lays eyes on her newborn daughter she exclaims, “Hm! Hmmm! Well, things will get better” (118). Finally, the narrator explains that Burlee’s mother decides that after seven babies Burlee would be last because “she must be the bottom of the barrel!” (119)

Furthermore, Burlee’s family is extremely poor, which only adds to her poor conception of herself. As the narrator explains,

Wasn’t much food (well, seven kids, you know) and her diapers always wet making little sores on her baby-soft behind. She grown now and still got some of the marks! Little eyes be matted sometimes with something and nose all
runny cause not enough heat for the house. They paid rent but nobody ever fixed that little house up! Paint rotted away, peeling walls, mildew even grew on the walls, and it was almost too cold for rats in there. Anyway, Burlee suffered all what being one of seven kids will make you suffer when your family is poor. The mama can try all she want to, she can’t be everywhere doing everything at the same time! (118)

So in addition to being born ugly, Burlee is born into an ugly life, where her basic physical needs are barely met. Her situation seems hopeless. Her mother is overburdened with children. Her father—who in typical Cooper fashion has little to do with the action of the story—is described as “the dear sweet man [who] be laying in your bed waiting for you to get through doing your work so you can come to bed and he can give you the start of something big that will wear you out some more in another nine months” (118). In other words, he is no help in ending the struggle. Initially, it appears that Burlee simply does not have a chance and that her mother’s attitude towards her daughter’s lack of aesthetic beauty will contribute to great psychological damage in her daughter. After all, how many mothers believe their children to be ugly? But as the story develops, we find that Burlee’s mother is actually her greatest ally, whether the daughter is ugly or not.

Regardless of how overwhelming her life is, Burlee’s mother finds the time to provide her daughter with much needed consolation and soul-edifying advice. For example, when Burlee comes home extolling the miseries inherent to being one of the less-attractive and poorer girls in school, her mother tells her:

“Burlee, don’t cry. Don’t pay no attention to what them kids say.”
“Burlee would cry back, “Mama, I can’t help it!”
Mama would say, “You can help anything, Burlee.”
“Burlee would sniffle, “I try, Mama.”
Mama would pet and rub. “You not ugly to me. And pretty ain’t everything! Pretty is as pretty do!”
Through the warmth of her mother’s love, Burlee would whisper, “What does pretty do, Mama?”
Mama would hold her closer. “Pretty go to school, study hard, and learn how not to need nobody but herself!”

Burlee would smile a little. “I do that Mama. That don’t make me pretty!”

Mama would smile back. “Yes it do! A little more every day! You watch and see. It adds up! You learn all you can! When you gets through learning, you gon see something!” (119)

We will never know whether Burlee’s mother truly believes her daughter to be physically pretty or not. No one can forget that merely half of a page earlier she had referred to her daughter as the “bottom of the barrel.” What is clear however is that Burlee’s mother understands the necessity of ensuring that Burlee sees herself as beautiful. She intimately understands that Burlee’s very life depends on how she perceives herself. If she sees ugliness, she may allow herself to fall into situations that will reflect her low self-esteem. And even if she is able to somehow navigate around such situations, a low sense of self always equals low expectations for self. This exchange indicates that Burlee’s mother’s is aggressively attempting to do all that she can to counteract the possibility that her beloved daughter might follow a self-destructive path. After all, one need only remember Pecola in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* to understand how devastating it can be to a girl’s psyche when she believes herself to be ugly and her mother is not emotionally available to counteract such a soul-destroying notion.

The result of her mother’s insistence that she concentrate on internal brilliance rather than external attractiveness is that Burlee finds ways to use her mind to make up for the physical characteristics society determines that she does not have. Ironically, she focuses her efforts on filling the cosmetic needs of the black community in return for financial independence. When she observes that there are no black beauty schools, nail technicians, or seamstresses that black women can readily access, she puts a plan in place that creates such
institutions. In doing so, she raises the self-esteem of other women who, for myriad reasons, were unable to do the same, even though they were in a position to do so. On several occasions throughout the story, Burlee finds herself alone in a secret place. At one time, this place was her refuge from the insults heaped upon her by classmates who refused to see beyond her alleged “ugliness.” In time however, this same secret place becomes a space where she can make plans and flesh out problems. In other words, it is the space where she learns to do the very powerful thing her mother instructed her to do, think.

As stated earlier, Burlee’s father’s role in the story is nearly insignificant. However, his presence does serve as a mechanism by which Cooper can highlight the excellent role model Burlee’s mother turns out to be. The narrator describes her as, “A thin, wiry woman, but she had the strength she got from somewhere. She said it was from God.” (120). While the narrator does not go into detail regarding the mother’s religious fervor, she does explain that “she had told her husband the Lord said to her, ‘Stop makin love’ (cause she was tired).” When her husband asks, “what am I sposed to do,” she tells him “I don’t know. You got to ask the Lord that!”(120). Clearly, Burlee’s mother has, in many ways, been a victim of her own body. Although she loves the children she bears, she cannot deny the physical toll that pregnancy, labor, and mothering have had on her. Cooper’s description of the husband suggests that he either has little concern about the consequences of sex or simply cannot control his sexual urges enough to cease such relations. But it does not matter. Burlee has had enough. While she cannot undue the effects of seven children on her life, she can ensure that the burdens of pregnancy end. Obviously, she does not have the necessary access to birth control or abortions. All she has is the ability to tell her husband no. In light of the
constraints that patriarchy often places on women’s bodies, reclaiming her body for herself by denying her husband’s supposed needs is a remarkable feat.

The effect of Burlee’s mother’s decision to reclaim her body is that Burlee learns to own hers. She freely partakes in a sexual relationship with Winston and does so with out any romanticized thoughts of marriage or children. Amazingly, she does not become pregnant. There is no indication that she finds her way to birth control, but the resourcefulness and caution that she demonstrates throughout the tale suggests that Cooper intends the reader to believe that she will do what ever is necessary to ensure her success. Furthermore, when she finally finds the rich man that she has been searching for and saving her love for, she has enough self-awareness and self-love to “slap the living shit out of [this] man” who had “pinched and twisted the nipples of her soft human breast, then grabbed a handful of the same soft breast and squeezed hard, very hard!” (128-129). She wants this man. She has waited patiently for a rich man to love for her entire life. But she is not willing to subject her body to this man’s bizarre sexual proclivities, just as her mother finally refuses to give in to her husband’s thoughtless sexual requests.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins also explains that early in life “black daughters learn to expect to work, to strive for an education, so they can support themselves, and to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities because these skills are essential to their own survival and those for who they will eventually be responsible.” She also adds, “Mothers also know that if their daughters uncritically accept the glorified “mammy work” and sexual politics offered Black women, they can become willing participants in their own subordination” (183). Burlee’s mother expresses these very sentiments while mothering her daughter. Once Burlee begins making money by working in
the “beauty business” she decides to sign up for a course that would instruct her in becoming a nail technician. Her mother supports her as much as she can because “she wanted her daughter to want something, to do something for herself! Sit in a chair and do white folks’ nails, stead of in the kitchen or somewhere with a mop and broom!” (123). And, indeed, she does. Due to her own diligence and her mother’s guidance, Burlee becomes the financially wealthy person she has been wanting to be.

In the end, Burlee finally finds the kind of love she desires in the arms of a childhood admirer. Still, “The Magic Power of Need” reveals itself to be more than a mere love story. Burlee has learned many lessons. Although the most obvious one is that attaching money to one’s hunt for love can rarely produce a loving relationship, I would argue that Cooper’s intended message is more significant than this. During Burlee’s search for love she discovers that authentic wealth, the kind that sustains happiness for a lifetime, will not be found in marriage to a man but is always found within the self. While the circumstances of her mother’s life hinders her ability to fully see herself as having a choice, she ensures that Burlee does. Hence, by the time Burlee finds the wealthy man she has been refashioning herself for, her extreme self-investment and the wisdom endowed to her by her mother both serve to thwart her ability to compromise self-actualization for dependency on a man, even if he is rich. This story reveals a happy ending, not only because the good guy gets the good girl, but also because it showcases the possibilities available when women realize the potency of agency.

Although it is clear by the end of story that Burlee is a self-made woman, it is also apparent that her mother provides necessary love and support and therefore makes Burlee’s journey toward personal success a less rocky one. In other stories by Cooper, the
mother/daughter relationship is not always as tranquil. In “Livin and Learnin” from the
collection *Some Love, Some Pain, Sometime*, Cooper fully elucidates the meaning of an old
African American saying, “Bought sense is the best sense.” In other words, lessons about life
that are learned the hard way—by living them—are the ones a person is not likely to ever
forget. Unlike Burlee, who is determined not to fall into the same social and economic traps
that her mother has, with Tilla’s story, Cooper goes to great strides to show how very easy it
is for a woman to repeat the mistakes of her mother’s and even her grandmother’s past. Since
the social ills that plague the black community are often cyclical, the behavioral patterns of
young black women and men tend to be also. “Livin and Learnin” is a story that examines
how such cycles are both created and broken, thus creating the opportunity for a healthier
existence for future generations of the young and naïve.

In “Livin and Learnin” Cooper presents the story of Tilla, the daughter and
granddaughter of two black women who have often found themselves in love with “mannish
bums” (126). That is, men who are unable to provide the financial and/or emotional support
necessary to satisfy a woman’s desire for happiness. As the story opens, Tilla explains that
she is not impressed with the young man her fourteen year old daughter is dating. As she puts
it, that ”slick-head bum . . . [and] mannish boy don’t look like he mean nobody no good”
(126). She further exclaims “you better leave that boy alone cause he ain’t gonna mean
nothing but trouble” (126). These intended words of wisdom fall upon deaf ears, just as they
did when the narrator’s own mother recited them to her a generation earlier. As she
remembers, “I realized I was saying what my grandmamma told my mama and what my
mama told me long ago. Almost the same words” (126). It is the narrator’s younger years that
are the central focus of the story.
During her childhood, Tilla witnessed the heavy penalty her mother paid for becoming pregnant at fifteen years old. Her grandmother never forgives her daughter, Tilla’s mother, for becoming pregnant so young. The disappointment and anger she feels is no doubt exacerbated by the disappearance (abandonment) by the narrator’s father. Although briefly mentioned, Cooper’s disgust with men who abandon their children is, yet again, highlighted in this story. This is indicated by Tilla’s observation that her mother had no choice but to endure the harsh treatment of her mother and accept the responsibility of young motherhood because “she couldn’t run off nowhere and leave her body behind like a daddy can” (126).

Although the grandmother’s disappointment overshadows her ability to compassionately nurture her daughter through a difficult time, she succeeds in ensuring that her daughter achieves a high school diploma and secures a “decent job” (127) to raise her child. By “decent,” Tilla means any occupation that does not require domestic service to whites or denigration of the female body, i.e. prostitution. Hence, while she is unable to protect her daughter from the consequences of over-romanticizing sexual relations with men, she does ensure that her daughter is able to thrive in a world that has little interest in black women’s survival. After several years struggling as a single parent, Tilla’s mother moves out of her mother’s home and into a kitchenette apartment. Although Cooper does not go into much detail regarding Tilla’s childhood, obvious assumptions can be made since a kitchenette is the only kind of residence that her mother could afford.

One might assume that since Tilla witnessed the many hardships her mother has experienced, from the shame of teenage pregnancy to the trials of life as a single parent, she would be extremely careful about allowing herself to fall prey to the same predicaments. But she does not. Instead, she foolishly finds herself attracted to yet another “mannish bum” who
has no interest in her beyond the occasional sexual interlude. Like Burlee, in “The Magic Strength of Need,” Tilla shuns the advances of a childhood friend who eventually reveals himself to be the best man available to her. But, in typical Cooper fashion, Tilla must undergo a series of life-altering circumstances before she is able to recognize what is good for her.

As stated earlier, Tilla suffers from an over-romanticized concept of love and marriage. While this is often typical of teenaged girls, Tilla’s mother knows that young, poor black girls cannot afford to revel too freely in such ideas because the consequences of indulging in any foolishness that might lead to adolescent premarital sex will inevitably lead to disaster. Thus when fifteen and half years old Tilla begins a sexual affair with thirty-eight year old Webb, her mother reacts with increasing anger. While Tilla sees Webb as “sexy” and “smooth,” her mother recognizes that he is a predator. When she meets him for the first time her reaction to their relationship is anything but supportive: “This man ain’t got shit for you! Do you hear him? He don’t want you! He don’t mean nothing but trouble for you! You fool!” (138). Her own memory of what such relations can cost is what causes Tilla’s mother to so adamantly object her daughter’s relationship with a man that she recognizes as of the same caliber as the boy who impregnated her and disappeared in her own youth. She desperately attempts to warn her daughter about fraternizing with a man who lacks a sense of morals. But Tilla, determined to make an impossible relationship work, defies her mother’s wishes and intentionally allows herself to become pregnant in the hopes of marrying the man of her clearly limited dreams. Tilla’s mother reacts to Tilla’s foolish fascination with a mixture of anger and sadness—anger because her daughter refused to heed her warnings, sadness because she has failed to protect her child from many forthcoming years of struggle. As Tilla
remembers, “My mama liked to died. Not only because I was remindin her of her pain in raisin me, but because she knew what my pain was gonna be” (148).

After threatening Webb with a call to the police on statutory rape charges, Tilla’s mother forces her daughter to marry him. One might assume that her mother’s insistence on their marriage is an attempt to legitimize their relationship and child, but this in not true. Tilla believes that her daughter has betrayed her. Earlier in the story, Tilla recounts how she had always been a good student because her parents “depended on [her] to do the only thing [she] had to do; get good grades in school to work on [her] future” (136). Once she begins having sex with Webb however, she begins to believe that a future with him is more valuable. Clearly her mother wanted her daughter to achieve the dreams that she was not able to reach once her world began to revolve around the responsibilities inherent to raising a child. It is these feelings of betrayal that cause her to refuse to allow her daughter to remain in her home. She understands that that while a wedding may force the legal responsibilities of fatherhood upon Webb, it will not free her daughter from the attachment she has for a man who becomes the walking embodiment of her emotional pain. This seems cruel on the surface, but Tilla’s mother is not abandoning her, she is saving her. It for this reason that she laments:

You wanted it, you got it. No matter what I told you, you forgot about me and chose him. Now you go with him til you get enough! I’ll be here if you need me, but don’t come here to stay til you are good and through with him! You are a fool! . . . She broke down and cried then.

Mama wasn’t through though, said, “You gonna wake up one day and find out you can’t let your behind do your thinking! You better think with your head . . . and let your behind stick to sittin til you find somebody it can sit RIGHT with!” She wiped a tear from her face and some from mine. “You bout to have a baby, child. One day, sooner than you think, it’s gonna be your turn. You gonna learn what I mean.” (141)
Her final words, “you gonna learn what I mean” echo the warnings of Tilla’s grandmother and herself, and thus highlight the cyclical nature of these women’s predicaments.

Since Tilla’s mother does not force her daughter to get a job or even a high school diploma, Tilla’s plight is inevitably worse than her mother’s was during her early years as a young mother. Although Tilla has the husband she desires, his resentment at being forced to marry a woman for whom he clearly has no respect creates in him a desire to counter her unconditional overtures of love with equally intense verbal cruelty and emotional neglect. They go on in this manner for several years until Tilla finally achieves what her mother so adamantly hopes for. After several years of his infidelity, cigarette addiction, alcoholism and unreciprocated love, Tilla finally gathers the gumption to leave Webb and fend for herself. But this seemingly simple task proves to be a challenge.

In what appears to be a series of unrelated occurrences, Tilla finds herself forced to consider another way of being. With the help of her mother and grandmother, who send a piano to her home to enable her to provide piano and flute lessons for her children, Tilla discovers that she has interests in other things besides her wayward husband. While waiting at a bus stop after completing a day’s work in restaurant kitchen, Tilla observes what can only be interpreted as her future self, a tired older woman who is in the midst of a verbal brawl with a man who is obviously used to taking advantage of what appears to be a needy nature. While Tilla sees the future in this woman’s tired countenance, the woman sees her own past in Tilla’s. In admonishing her for witnessing her misery she tells Tilla, “You only young once, honey. Heist your ass up and do something for yourself! . . . Bein a young fool can be fun, but young fools turn into old fools, and it ain’t no fun no more!” (148-149). Obviously, the woman recognizes in Tilla that which Tilla is having great difficulty acknowledging in
herself. Finally, Tilla is reminded of the dreams she once had in her younger pre-Webb years when she is greeted by an old high school friend, Maxine. Maxine, who is on the verge of graduating from law school, forces Tilla to remember the person she was before she met Webb and to reconsider the limitations she has imposed upon her own life. In response to Tilla’s admission that marriage to Webb had been the dream of her youth, Maxine admonishes, “You don’t look happy to me. Maybe you need another dream. One day the children will be gone. He [Webb] may be dead. That’s when you will need a dream all your own. He may even leave you broke! You need a dream that makes money!” (150).

With the inclusion of these two minor characters, Cooper proves how other women can unknowingly be instruments of change for their sisters who may be drowning in life circumstances that they are too afraid to take control of. It is no surprise then, when after these brief encounters that Tilla, with a fervor that can only be compared to that of Charles Dicken’s Ebenezer Scrooge following his visitation of spirits, embraces the knowledge that her mother and grandmother had tried so desperately to impart. She understands that the life she has created with Webb has actually kept her from having her own. Having a child, as Maxine explains to her, is something that “any woman can do” (150), but when a woman achieves agency over her life, her existence becomes truly self-gratifying. With this epiphany as her driving force, Tilla decides to enroll in a three-month GED course and then attend junior college. Her greatest personal achievement, however, occurs the day she decides to ask Webb for a divorce. Although it seems her attempt at independence is nearly thwarted when Webb gets into a car accident that leaves him confined to a wheelchair, Tilla proves her new found faithfulness to herself when she delivers him to his lover’s house and, finally, out of her life.
After all of the emotional upheavals that Tilla has survived, the narrative ends with an acknowledgement of her mother’s wisdom. As Tilla explains, “my mama says I got some sense now. Yes, I’m getting better at it” (157). It is Tilla’s hard earned wisdom as a mother, and thus a woman, that this story celebrates. It is, indeed, a healing narrative and is only one of many offerings by Cooper on how to bring an end to black women’s generational pain. It is appropriate then that when Tilla’s teenaged daughter brings home “a slick-headed, crafty-lookin bum” (157), she understands that it is not enough to merely warn her of the painful future which awaits her if she succumbs to the same myths of romantic love that she, her mother, and her grandmother did. Such warnings had not worked in the past. It is time for a change. What is required, in order to save another generation from following the same painful road, is deep thought and action. By recognizing and utilizing the remarkable power that maternal love can have in empowering children, Tilla intends to make better use of the past to save her daughter’s future. As she states in the final words of the narrative, “. . . I’m coming up fighting for her” (157).

The Healing Presence of “Othermothers”

Throughout Cooper’s fiction it is not uncommon to find stories where young people have been abandoned by one or more parents. Beyond the perpetual presence of an abandoning father figure, many of Cooper’s stories also present situations where a child has been left to fend for her self alone because the mother has either died or run away. Each of her novels for example, feature protagonists who are orphaned by their parents. Because both Family and The Wake of the Wind, are set in the antebellum American south, it is not so surprising to find that the central characters, Always and Lifee are the products of white fathers who have no desire to own up to any paternal responsibility for their black children.
and mothers who, because they are unable to properly mother their children decide, to take
their own lives or give their children away. *In Search of Satisfaction*, which is set in a
Reconstruction-era southern state, provides a similar situation as both of its main characters,
Hossana and YinYang, lose their parents fairly early in life and are therefore forced to make a
way for themselves without guidance from blood parents. Since similar situations arise
throughout the stories in Cooper’s collections a noticeable pattern is created, one of which is
that in situations where a parent is unable to properly nurture a child, only an act of nurturing
intervention will save the child.

In most stories where a female protagonist loses her parents at an early age, it is the
presence of another woman that makes it possible for her to forge a healthy existence.
Although the journey is rough, such characters succeed at becoming self-reliant and
productive because other individuals usually women, take a vested interest in their well-being
while they are young. These “othermothers,” as Rosalie Troester and Patricia Hill Collins
have dubbed them, are persons who, through a kind of informal adoption, either assist with or
take over the role of biological mothers who, if not simply overburdened, are physically or
emotionally unavailable to their children (178-183).

*Homemade Love*’s opening story, “Swimming to the Top of the Rain” begins with a
reference to the reliability and value of mothers. As Care, the narrator, explains, mothers are
“mostly the one person you can count on!” (1). The irony here is that Care’s mother dies
while giving birth to her, rendering Care and her two sisters, Older and Middle, as orphans.
The only mention of the sisters’ father is that at some point after he has abandoned the family,
the mother “tired from holding up against hard times all by herself,” allows the father to come
back into her bed because she wants “to be held one more time by someone else besides a
child” (2). However, after the mother informs him that she is pregnant with their third child, he abandons his family once again. This time, as Care mourns, “he musta broke something inside her besides her spirit and her heart cause when [Care] took her first breath, she took her last breath” (2). Care’s mother, overburdened by having had to work hard to support herself and her children for many years, is unable to reconcile how her children’s father could abuse her love with such frequency and have such flagrant disregard for his family. Since she is unable to sustain the disappointments of her life, even for the sake of her children, she dies while giving birth to her last child. As Care remembers it, “we was alone, three babies” (2).

The reader is left to wonder if Care’s mother willingly gives up on her own life and her and her daughter’s. A mother dying in childbirth is not unheard of, but the narrator’s account of the circumstances that surround her mother’s death prompt the reader to consider this possibility. If this is true, Cooper’s description of Care’s mother problematizes the traditional stereotype of the all-enduring strong, black woman whose dogged strength alone allows her to protect herself and her family from assaults upon their well-being. Although she does not take her own life as do Always’s and Clora’s mothers in Family, her apparent inability to sustain the physical and emotional toils inherent in the intersections of race, class, and gender in the lives of many black women render her children’s lives essentially as “up for grabs.” In this way, Cooper addresses Trudier Harris-Lopez’s complaint that much of African American literature has produced “black female characters who [are] more suprahuman than human” and that “the superficial attractions of strength have dominated portraits of black female characters to the detriment of other possibilities” (10-11). Indeed, Harris-Lopez treats Cooper’s depiction of Family’s Clora as an example of this very phenomenon. In “Swimming to the Top of the Rain” however, Care’s mother’s death can be interpreted as
surrender. Unlike stereotypical black women who can “swallow their pain, gird their loins against trouble . . . and persist in spite of adversity,” Cooper’s depiction of Care’s mother’s pain in life and death indicates that she is just a woman—a human being.

As Care and her sisters are all under the age of six, they are obviously unable to properly take care of themselves. Interestingly, the sisters discover that they have two aunts, Bell and Ellen, whom they have never been informed of. This is odd. A woman who is as desperately in need of emotional and financial assistance as Care’s mother had been would probably seek the comfort and care of her closest family members. If that had occurred, the sisters would know their aunts. This begs the question, “why?” Why does Care’s mother shun the opportunity to gain assistance from an extended family member, especially since such relationships are so very prominent both in reality and within the context of many of Cooper’s works? Perhaps there is no valid answer to for this. But one could examine the intensity of Care’s mother’s foolish hope that the sexual relationship she has shared with her children’s father can blossom into something more permanent. Perhaps she is so well steeped in romanticized and/or patriarchal notions of male/female relationships that she cannot consider the possibility of other, less socially acceptable roads to intimacy such as finding another man—or woman. If this is the case then it is not improbable that she would try to protect her daughters from what she may believe to be the sexual deviancy of both of her sisters. The text clearly states that Care believes her Aunt Bell is a prostitute. However, there is little clarity about Aunt Ellen’s background. If she is lesbian, which is a possibility that the text seems to lean toward, it would explain why after the mother’s death “somebody knew how to reach them” (2), but the girls, even the oldest one, do not.
As Care remembers, “We think my Aunt Bell was a prostitute” (2). There is never any concrete evidence provided to validate this claim, but there are plenty of clues. Although this first “othermother” is kind and good to her nieces, she is only able to provide custodial care for her newly acquired dependents: “She would pay the rent, stock up the food, give us some little shiny toy or dress, lotsa warnings about strangers, and leave us with a hug and kiss. If she had a husband, we never met him” (2). While there is no concrete explanation for Care’s suspicion, we know that the aunt must have had an occupation of some kind. Furthermore, the violent nature of her death—she is found stabbed to death on the front porch—suggests that she is victimized by the kind of vice that is inherent to the life of a prostitute. The most prevalent indication of Aunt Bell’s occupation is her personality. While she does display some amounts of affection for her nieces, she also has a tendency to be “sad, even when she was smiling and laughing” (2). Care would often “cry for her when [she] thought of her and not know why she was crying” (3). Obviously, Aunt Bell’s lifestyle creates a great deal of sadness that is not allowed a proper outlet.

After Aunt Bell expires, Aunt Ellen becomes the sisters’ primary caretaker. Although the text does not state that she is a lesbian, she clearly is a woman whose very existence is a challenge to stereotypical portrayals of womanhood. First, she is not married and there is no indication that she has or has had any relationship with a man, especially since she has borne no children. Furthermore, Care remembers her as “a husky-looking, mannish-looking woman who wore pants, a straw hat, and a red flowered blouse” (3). Perhaps this is yet another instance in which the stereotype of the black woman is presented as being abnormally strong, physically and mentally. But one could also argue that Cooper’s depiction of Aunt Ellen is more akin to Barbara Christian’s observations regarding traditional descriptions of black
lesbians: “The stereotypical body type of a black lesbian was that she looked mannish; in other words she was not so much a woman as much as she was a defective man . . .” (191). Indeed, Aunt Ellen takes on responsibilities usually attributed to the “man of the house.” After explaining to the girls that she “aint no cookie-bakin’ woman” but that she will “provide the stove and the dough” (4), she, without any assistance, builds their new home, mixing and pouring the concrete herself. Aunt Ellen’s no-nonsense personality appears to be devoid of the kind of emotional expression usually attributed to women. Thus, when the oldest sister, Older, attempts to return home with two children in tow after having been abandoned by her husband, Aunt Ellen emphatically exclaims: “NO, no! I ain’t holdin’ up no lean poles! If you old enough to spread them knees and make babies, you old enough to take care yourself! You done stepped out into the rain, now you learn to swim!” (5). A similar scenario occurs in “Livin’ and Learnin’” but unlike Tilla’s mother, Aunt Ellen does not display any emotion when she denies her niece access to her home. While Older “cried a little cause . . . she was scared of the world” (5), Aunt Ellen does not respond to her tears. Instead, she “took her around to find a steady job and place to live” (5). Most importantly, Care states that although Aunt Ellen is happy to have found her nieces, she also senses a “sadness, again” (4), much like the sadness her other aunt displayed periodically. As both women could be considered to be societal pariahs, their occasional displays of sadness are understandable.

Aunt Ellen immediately tells her nieces, “Aint gonna be no more separation nomore, you got me” (4). Her profound eagerness to take on the responsibilities of these children, suggests that she intends to right a wrong. The phrase “no more separation,” beyond referring to the children being separated from their mother and their dead aunt, could also be a reflection of Aunt Ellen’s own desire to ensure that she maintain the family ties lost because she had so
little, if any, interaction with either of her dead sisters. Furthermore, the simplicity of her statement “I loved my sister and I love you” (4) suggests that she intends to mend the severed tie to her by giving her nieces all of the love she was not able to give to her sister. The response of the daughters—“three little hearts just musts exploded with love and peace”(4)—indicates more than mere happiness at being offered a place to call home, but also a kind of reconciliation.

As stated earlier, there is no clear indication of whether Aunt Bell is a prostitute or Aunt Ellen is lesbian. There are only hints. If they are “sexual outlaws,” their willingness to live in a manner that is outside of the roles prescribed by a patriarchal culture can explain why Aunt Ellen is so adamant about the importance of her nieces “learning to swim to the top of the rain” (4). Because both women exist outside of the confines of male authority, they are more than able to teach the value of self-sufficiency. Furthermore, Cooper’s choice to depict the heroines of the story in such a manner effectively challenges the traditional idea of family as defined in Western culture. As Patricia Hill-Collins observes “the prostitute and the lesbian have historically functioned as the major symbols of threat. Both sets of women reject the hetero sexual nuclear family upon which so many social institutions rely for meaning” (168).

Yet Cooper chooses not to assign a definite occupational or sexual identity to these two women. Perhaps she wants to highlight the more important idea here. These women are loved because they provide care when needed. They are “othermothers,” women who out of love and/or obligation, take on the responsibility of mothering their sister’s children. For these girls—these orphans—the occupation and sexual orientation of their aunts are inconsequential. The only fact that matters is that they are given the opportunity to be mothered again. The validity of this idea is most effectively displayed by Care’s tendency to
refer to Aunt Ellen as “Aunt Mama” (7). When her Aunt Mama dies she does not reminisce on any perceived acts of sexual deviancy or displays of cold emotion because there are none. She only exhibits the kind of love and gratitude that any daughter of a loving parent would: “I loved her, my Aunt Mama, She taught me so much. All I knew to make my life with” (7).

More than either of her sister’s, Care understands how important it is that women allow other persons in to their lives to assist with the rearing of children. This is probably because she establishes the closest relationship with their Aunt Mama. Surely it is significant that like Aunt Ellen, Care does not bear any children of her own. Thus like her aunt, she is emotionally free to assist her sisters with the rearing of their children. And her assistance is certainly needed. Both of her sisters find themselves in precarious situations where they are unable to handle their roles as mothers without emotionally damaging their daughters. Through her depiction of how significant Care’s presence becomes in the complex lives of both her sisters and her nieces, Cooper extols the value of othermothers as a necessity for establishing or maintaining healthy relationships between parent and child, especially when the biological mother is emotionally ill.

Care’s oldest sister suffers from severe color-consciousness. There is no indication as to why, but this is not an unknown phenomenon among persons of African descent. Cooper does not provide much detail regarding Older's preference for lighter complexioned black people and this is probably because she assumes that most of her readers already understand how problematic such preferences traditionally have been. So common is this issue among African Americans that it is not always considered as an illness of the psyche, but merely a preference that many contemporary African Americans find intolerable. However, it is an illness. Cooper, like many other African American writers, recognizes the dangers such
ideologies can pose to the souls of black folks. Thus when Care states that Older “just had to have that real light man” most readers of Cooper fiction will understand that Older, indeed, has a problem. The significance of her problem is not fully revealed however, until the Care explains the preferential treatment that Older lavishes upon her “oldest pretty, light [daughter] leaving the other one out a lot” (9). According to Care, “The oldest one had more and better clothes and was a kinda snotty girl” while Care “took to sewing, buying the material [herself], for the brownskin one” (9). Oldest’s poor treatment of her youngest daughter could surely produce a severe case of low self-esteem within her, but her emotional self is saved by her aunt, Care, who takes a decided interest in ensuring that she is able to provide the love and attention that her sister does not seem willing to provide. By the end of the story, Older’s oldest child proves to be the worse for her mother’s inability to provide healthy nurturing. She treats her mother with such severe disrespect that she does not care enough to come to her mother’s aid after a heart attack and asks her to wear a maid’s uniform when visiting. The youngest daughter reveals herself to be the most psychologically stable and this no doubt due to her Aunt Care, who takes a vested interest in ensuring that her niece receives the necessary “mothering” that her sister refuses to provide.

Care’s sister, Middle, has one child, a daughter, but like her own mother Middle suffers greatly because she is forced to raise her child without a husband. While Cooper does not indicate what happens to Middle’s husband, the reader can assume that he abandons his wife and child, much like Middle’s father had when she was a child. Furthermore, the anger that feeds her treatment of her daughter suggests a level of bitterness than can easily be understood as resulting from having been abandoned twice, once by her father and again by her husband. Intense fear that her daughter will suffer a similar fate feeds her overprotective stance
regarding her daughter’s budding sexuality. She is unable to appreciate the innocent longings
of her daughter for male attention and instead assumes that what should be considered as
normal interaction between her pubescent daughter and inquisitive young boys (walking home
holding hands with a boy and kissing in the hallway) is actually indicative of lascivious sexual
behavior. As a result, Middle’s daughter moves further away from her mother’s overbearing
and destructive methods of mothering and into the arms of a young man. Not surprisingly,
she becomes pregnant at sixteen. Care believes that Middle had been reasonable in
demanding that her daughter was to have “no company til [she] was eighteen years old and
through with school!” (11). But she also recognizes that her sister does not provide the kind
of open hearted nurturing necessary to balance such a demand, which inevitably runs counter
to the drives of young people whose interest in one another begins long before eighteen.
Thus, as Care explains, “she didn’t give her the hugs and kisses and touches we all need. So
the girl found her own” (11).

When Middle demands that her daughter seek an abortion, her daughter refuses to do so.
In response, Middle decides to “show her how her evil ways had cost her her mother, and how
lost she would be without her” (11-12). When she tells her daughter that she has to leave, her
intentions are not to teach her how to become an independent woman as Aunt Ellen’s had
been when she refuses to house Older and her two children. She is instead using her
daughter’s pregnancy as an opportunity to vent her own anger. This anger, which has been
festering for many years, has thwarted Middle’s ability to nurture and love her daughter. She
blames sex, men, and pregnancy for the misery of her life and the early death of her mother.
Thus, she cannot provide her daughter with wisdom when she needs it most. She is only able
to react in a manner that alienates her daughter so thoroughly that her daughter becomes the very sexual deviant that her mother has been treated her as. She becomes a prostitute.

Fortunately, Middle’s Aunt Care, has been watching from the sidelines. Her insightful nature and her willingness to take on the mothering responsibilities of her sisters afford her the ability to fully avail herself when she suspects that her sisters are blindly destroying the psyches of their daughters. Each time Middle complains that her daughter is behaving in a manner that is inappropriate, Care provides a wisdom-laden explanation for the behavior and admonishes her sister to lessen the destructive intensity of her maternal grip. Not surprisingly, it is Care who notices when her niece’s face begins to display a kind of sadness reminiscent of Aunt Bell’s. While it is too late to step in and take over the nurturing of her Middle’s daughter, she is instrumental in ensuring that her sister becomes a nurturing “othermother” to her grandchild. After the young girl dies from a drug overdose, both Middle and Care accept the responsibility of “othermothering” the infant. As Care states, “Middle loved that grandchild so much, cause you see, she didn’t have nothing else in her life. It was empty!” (13). Clearly, Middle intends to make up for poorly mothering her own child, by effectively “othermothering” her grand child.

Cooper’s depiction of Middle is similar to Gloria Wade-Gayles observations regarding how black mothers mother their daughters: “Black mothers are suffocatingly protective and domineering precisely because they are determined to mold their daughters into whole and self actualizing persons in a society that devalues Black women” (12). Cooper presents several stories where Wade-Gayles’ theory is proven true. However, in trying to “mold” their daughters, Cooper’s mothers often fall short of nurturing and loving their beloved girls. Most of the time they are simply too poor in spirit and/or finances to make proper, life-affirming
decisions where children are concerned. Survival and teaching survival takes precedence over affectionate displays of love and understanding. Yet, invariably, problems are worked out. Mothers find a way to save their daughters either by forcing them to make their own way or staying in their daughter’s corner no matter problem. In situations where a biological mother is not available, there is always another mother who is willing to avail herself for taking up the slack.

*  *  *  *  *

When Cooper implores her black readers to make a spiritual return to the Motherland, she is attempting to remind them of the possibilities of greatness that may lie dormant in their bloodstreams. When she exposes the narcissistic behavior and thought patterns of a wayward black father in "No Lie," she is creating an opportunity for her readers, both men and women, to understand (at least, from Cooper's sensibilities) the impetus that drives black men to abandon their children and to consider the impact of such selfish behavior both on the perpetrator and on his victims. In creating heart-touching stories that address the endurance of black mothers who are able to overcome the less-than-fair realities of the world, the strength of black mothers who assist their children with navigating through life, or the heroism of those women who courageously add to the responsibilities of their own trying circumstances by assuming a mothering role in the life of a child, she is extolling the virtues of generations of black women who understood the importance of guiding young black girls in a racist and patriarchal world that usually refuses value their humanity.

In creating stories that reveal the intricate factors and cultural memories that continue to inform the behavior of her protagonists, Cooper challenges her reading audience to both acknowledge and move beyond impediments to psychological and behavioral health that
block the black family’s access to wellness, while simultaneously extolling the benefits of allowing oneself to tap into the power of familial relations in both peaceful and trying times. Although Cooper’s stories can be criticized as being too similar to fairy tales in that there is always a happy ending, I would argue that Cooper is less interested in creating common portrayals of black families than she is in initiating roads to healing. For many African American families, especially where mothers are forced into the position of sole provider, there are often so many obstacles to overcome that ensuring children receive proper spiritual nourishment can take a back seat to the necessities of survival. Cooper's fiction illustrates these issues and obstacles for all readers, even those who may not have had the life experiences necessary to truly identify with her characters. Clearly those who can identify with the black family dynamics presented are the readers who are most likely to be enriched by Cooper's stories. Yet when Cooper states "I write for those who do not know," I presume her to mean (among other possibilities) that she is referring to how she attempts to create fiction that provides an opportunity for all readers to be, at the least, enriched by her narratives if only because they so authentically capture much of the cultural nuances and traditional ailments of many aspects of black life. In other words, Cooper’s storytelling can be used as a space for enlightenment.

Endnotes


2 This term was first coined by Carol B. Stack in All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community, (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

3 For more on this concept see Joseph Holloway’s Africanisms in American Culture, Molefi Asante’s Afrocentricity, and Maulana Karenga’s Introduction to Black Studies.
4 For more on this topic see Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: The White Man’s Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912*.


7 This is not unlike celebrations of other cultures where one relives or remembers those historical acts that continue to define the essence of one’s identity, i.e. reenactments of the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, Fourth of July celebrations, or Cinco de Mayo.

8 As Trudier Harris Lopez explains, Clora is so strong that her spirit is able to remain in the presence of her children long after her physical body expires.

9 The Civil Rights Act of 1866 declared freed blacks were U.S. citizens. In 1868, the 14th Amendment granted blacks equal citizenship and civil rights.


13 Prior to emancipation, enslaved blacks would not have had the freedom to establish strong family ties. The ever-present threat of having a beloved family member sold away and the unlimited authority slave master had over slave made such constructs extremely difficult, but not impossible. See Naim Akbar’s *Chains and Images of Psychological Slavery*, Vernon Jordan’s *Roll Jordan Roll*, and John Blassingame’s *The Slave Community*.

14 See “Interview with J. California Cooper” in this study’s appendix.


17 The reader cannot determine the time in which the story takes place. It could be before or after Roe vs. Wade. More importantly, Cooper makes it clear that this family does not have the financial resources necessary to obtain birth control or abortions.

18 See chapter 5 of Trudier Harris’s *Saints, Sinners and Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature*.
Chapter 6: Daughter of the Black Aesthetic: J. California Cooper as “Functional” Artist

“I am not sure it is possible for a Negro to write well without making us aware he is Negro. . . . On the other hand, if being a Negro is the only subject, the writing is not important.”


In April 2004, I presented a paper on another contemporary African American writer, James Alan McPherson, at the 64th annual College Language Association conference. Having heard that I had nearly completed a dissertation which examined the fiction of J. California Cooper, a fellow educator insisted that I exchange email addresses with her, as she was interested in inviting me to speak to her African American students at a college in New Rochelle, New York. Apparently, this group had become enamored with Cooper’s works, but they were having a difficult time finding criticism to support their ideas about her fiction. When I asked her just what it was about Cooper’s work that her students loved so much she explained that Cooper presented “real world issues in real world terms.” Of interest to me here is the notion of “real world terms.” As I see it, “real” is the equivalent of “functional.”

Regardless of the patriarchal misogyny that often characterized the culture of the Black Power and Black Arts movements, few can deny the significance of this era on the progress and promotion of contemporary African Americans writers. Although several black movements had previously existed, the Black Arts movement promised great potential for success if only because the central tenet was the belief in the necessity for developing an appreciation for the cultural and political ideologies of black people. In light of the persistent presence of a white mainstream audience that found little value in black artistic creations and political assertions, black artists deemed it necessary to counteract the invalidating viewpoints of critics such as Louis Simpson.
Hence, when in 1968 James Brown emphatically shouted, “Say it loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud,” he was vocalizing the desires of an angry generation of black folks who felt the need to articulate the value of their existence and identity on their own terms. That same year Hoyt Fuller defined what would be dubbed the black aesthetic as “a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperatives of black experience” (1814). Maulana Karenga would mandate that black art be “functional, collective, and committing or committed” (1973-1974) and three years later Addison Gayle would promote the core criteria for judging black art as “not how beautiful is a melody, a play, a poem, or a novel, but how much more beautiful has the poem, melody, play or novel made the life of a single black man . . .” (1876). Of course, such definitions that consistently concluded with the term “black man” became the crux of the problem for black women revolutionaries. Alice Walker, Michelle Wallace, June Jordan and many other women writers during the 1970’s questioned the tendency of black nationalists to devalue the needs of black women and relegate them to positions beneath them—literally.  

Yet despite the validity of such criticisms, one cannot deny that the spirit of the Black Aesthetic ushered in a new day for black writers. For black women writers in particular, resistance to black patriarchy led to a black feminist movement that would eventually produce the literary artistry of contemporary black women’s literature. The idea that blacks, not whites, should be the primary audience for the artistic endeavors of black people is a concept that found its focus in this late 1960’s movement. It comes as no surprise then that contemporary black women’s writing reflects the experiences and concerns of its vast black woman readership.
As an artist who no doubt was influenced by the revolutionary aspects of the “angry sixties,” it is not improbable that when J. California Cooper states, “I write for those who need to know” she is contributing to Maulana Karenga’s mandate that black writers should create “functional” art. While she claims that she does not write specifically to a black audience, black people, especially black women, have been and continue to be her primary audience. It is true that Cooper has caught the interest of a major publishing company since the day Alice Walker “discovered” her in the early 1980’s.² She has been interviewed on numerous radio and television programs and invited to participate in many book signings and book talks. More importantly, her novels and short story collections have been reviewed by a plethora of popular, literary, and education journals. Yet Cooper’s fiction does not resonate with the academy the way the works of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor do. Slowly, but surely, however, her works are beginning to garner attention. When Black Issues in Higher Education presented an article entitled “African Americans Select their Favorite Books of the 20th Century,” which was a survey among blacks throughout the USA, Cooper’s Some Love, Some Pain, Sometime came in sixth. In the poll for favorite author, Cooper came in fourth just behind Maya Angelou, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison who, not surprisingly, was number one.³ For at least two years, panelists at the College Language Association conference have presented papers that examine Cooper’s fiction. Most importantly, discussions of Family have been included in the critical works of Angleyn Mitchell, Elizabeth Beaulieu, and Trudier Harris.⁴ Interestingly, both Mitchell and Harris come to similar conclusions regarding the functional quality of Cooper’s fiction. Mitchell concludes her study of “liberatory narratives by explaining that such works can be approached as providing what Farah Jasmine Griffith refers to as “textual healing,” works that “explore
female bodies as sites of healing, pleasure, and resistance” (520). In her discussion of the “dead but not gone” narrator of *Family*, Clora, Harris concludes that, “we are the ‘children’ Clora can reach” (97).

By invoking what Toni Cade Bambara calls the “kitchen tradition,” Cooper utilizes varying facets of the black oral tradition such as call and response patterns and words with specific psycho-semantic meanings. By creating a kind of “new world griot” in the figure of Clora, Cooper’s *Family* revisits and revises the enslaved black woman’s experiences during American slavery. As a keeper of African American cultural memories, Clora authoritatively speaks her story, inviting, informing, and instructing her readers, especially black women, to take control of their lives regardless of any factors that could hinder their movement towards self-actualization. In this manner, Clora becomes a figurative medium, bridging the gap between past and present and between Cooper and her readers. Cooper’s inclusion of a creational myth that prefaces the novel serves to challenge and amend the presumptions of white superiority that thwart the possibility for racial harmony. The depictions of black women during slavery highlight the heroic resourcefulness and strategic planning necessary for surviving one of the most extreme acts of physical and psychological oppression. As liberatory narratives that foreground their bravery and dignity, *Family* reinforces the humanity of enslaved black women. Racial passing, making the most of relationships with white women, and overt rebellion are presented as strategies for undermining and surviving white hegemony. In the end, the success of these strategies becomes less important than the fact that Cooper’s depictions of female slaves evidences the possibility that these women did not stand passively by and allow their lives to be destroyed by greedy “Masters of the Land;” they refused to be powerless victims to systematic tyranny. In amending stereotypical portrayals of
enslaved black women as “mammies, harlots, and tragic mulattoes” (Gabbin 248), Cooper’s *Family* weaves a powerful tale of inspiration for contemporary black women readers who can look to these fictive foremothers for sources of strength and endurance.

In *A Piece of Mine*, Cooper explores the complex realities of African American heterosexual intimacy. In each story, black women are challenged to make healthy choices while on their quest for true love. Unfortunately, the historic ramifications of existence in a country that has been hostile to African American sociological health makes it difficult for black women and men to establish nourishing methods for establishing “good loving.” Many of the stories in *A Piece of Mine* suggest that the debilitating effects of racism and sexism have often moved black women to become complicit in the perpetuation of their own trauma. Traditional gender roles, which are infused by patriarchal notions of male authority and female subservience, subvert black women’s ability to make healthy connections with black men. Yet these stories usually end on a optimistic note, as Cooper relates to the reader the probability that when a woman chooses the path which allows her to honor the self first, she can find her way to a healthy and loving relationship.

Another theme that permeates Cooper’s fiction is her exploration of the strengths and weaknesses of black family relationships. Her stories evidence the fact that African American family structures have not often conformed to Eurocentric determinations of familial normality. In the novel *The Wake of the Wind*, Cooper suggests that the forceful removal of Africans from a nourished existence in their motherland, Africa, is at the heart of what some persons consider to be black family dysfunction. Only a deliberate spiritual return to the unifying spiritual bosom of Mother Africa can return Africa’s children to a state peaceful enough to heal the issues that plague the black community, especially the black family. In
sociological research, the absent black father has usually been cited as one of the most significant factors in black family dysfunction. Cooper’s “No Lie” addresses this dilemma, not so much by examining the effects of the black father’s absence, but by exploring the factors that might contribute to the black man’s choice to relinquish his responsibilities. Finally, Cooper also presents stories that praise the endurance of both nuclear and extended black family constructs. To this end, she extols the power of black mother/daughter relationships, both biological and fictive, in the lives of black women. Essentially, Cooper’s explorations of the black family implore her readers to establish possibilities for moving beyond impediments to African American familial health and challenges them to establish avenues for resolving black cultural trauma so that its aftermath cannot continue into future generations.

Hazel Carby once wrote, “As academics we are well aware that we work with institutions that police the boundaries of cultural acceptability and define what is and what is not ‘literature’: our work as teachers and as critics creates, maintains, and sometimes challenges, those boundaries of acceptability” (28). I concur. While J. California Cooper’s fiction has not been regarded as equal in caliber to other more canonically accepted African American women writers, I would argue that the criteria for determining the aesthetic value of a fictional work may need to be reevaluated to include more writers, especially those who can, as Joanne Gabbin argues, “mine the vast reservoir of folk material . . . fulfill their artistic selves and . . . share messages of healing, wisdom, power, and love with others . . . unit[ing] them in a great literary tradition . . . (262). Like works of so many contemporary African American women writers, J. California Cooper’s fiction continues to attract readers who are curious about her imaginative takes on black women’s ways of being. Through storytelling
ceremonies that foreground black orality, overt yet functional didacticism, and presentations of characters with whom many black women can instantly empathize, Cooper creates the opportunities for readers to be in some way transformed. It is the potentially transformative power of Cooper’s stories that has been central to my study.

Endnotes


2 I say “discovered” because before Walker suggested that Cooper recreate her plays into a short fiction form that would become A Piece of Mine, Cooper had already made a name for herself among a Northern Californian audience that enjoyed her dramatic creations.


4 I will never forget meeting Professor Harris for the first time at Louisiana State University in 2003. When I told her the topic of my dissertation she encouragingly replied, “Go ahead, girl. Get Cooper out there!” I took this to mean that an extended discussion of Cooper’s work has been long overdue.
Works Cited


Appendix

Everybody Loves Me, but Nobody Knows About Me:
An Interview with J. California Cooper  (8/20/03)

Bryant: How did you become a writer?

Cooper: Well . . . By just doing what I thought of. Things just come together. I always liked to tell stories. I played with paper dolls until I was eighteen when my mother took them away. And when she took them away, then I began to write them down. This is why I started with plays. I wrote lots of plays but I didn’t show them to anybody because they weren’t any good. They were just figments of my mind. To me they weren’t any good. They were just things that I did because it was just natural. My mind thinks in stories. And if you look through this house you see that everything is set up to be a story. So I took them to the Berkeley Black Repertory Theater. They were gonna do something by Langston Hughes but they changed it and did one of my plays called How Now? And that is how I found out that somebody liked my work. And then they did them all, and then other people began to do them, and then the colleges began to do them. And then it was wanted in a theater in San Francisco and Alice Walker came to see them and she said if you make these into short stories I will print them. So then I said WOW! Somebody likes them that much. To me they were important because I knew what I was talking about. But not everybody wants to talk seriously. My stories sometimes are funny but I try to put some wisdom in there because wisdom has always been really important to me. I read the Bible and I used to keep up with those clips of those little “Why” sayings and things . . . just philosophies, things that most people remember but use when an emergency comes but I use it. So that’s how I became a writer. Then St. Martin’s picked up the next book and then the next book and then I said I want to do a novel so I did a novel an they did not care for the novel because they said no one is going to want to hear someone talking, you know like a monologue
or something. So then they threw it on the market and then Doubleday did a really high bid for it
and then I was against it (laughter) So Doubleday has been doing all of my books since.

Bryant: So the book you are speaking of is Family?

Cooper: Yes!

Bryant: This is a personal question for me. I would like to know why you chose to have Clora
to exist in this kind of “in between” kind of place?

Cooper: She did it. She did it. I didn’t do it.

Bryant: Okay. So where did she exist then? If it was not “here” on the earth and not “there” as
in some otherworldly realm, where then? I am very interested because it is such an interesting
narrative technique.

Cooper: Well, you can print this anyway you want to but this is the honest to God truth. I don’t
sit down and think of what to do with these stories. When it rains, somebody starts talking and
then I start thinking and writing it. I listen for two or three days until I’ve got it right. And I ask
them questions. And then, which sounds like I am crazy but I don’t think so, but when I’ve got it
right I write it. And everything is the first draft. I don’t go back over change things because they
have already told me what it was. And that is why every one of my stories sounds like someone
is telling you a story because somebody is telling you a story.

So when she was out there, in fact when she said, you know what happened, I died, and I
said “aw” but I know how she was out there. But I know how she was out there. Because lots of
things are in the ether, are in the universe. You know you just don’t know. You can’t know
everything. People used to say, “Where’d you get the inspiration for it,” and they would have a
pencil and paper ready. I would try to figure it out and try to explain and pretty soon I began to
lose the inspiration. So I just quit trying to explain it because even I don’t know. I just know that I like stories and that people come to tell me stories.

I think playing with paper dolls for eighteen years was really enough to pique my imagination. And then I played alone as a child. I liked playing by myself. Trees were, not a soul, but they were alive to me. Everything had a personality and I fell in love with things. I didn’t care so much for people as did for animals and trees and other things. That’s why I had so much stuff around me. I never get rid of it.

Bryant: Okay, great. So you were born and raised in the Bay Area, right?

Cooper: Yes. Berkeley.

Bryant: Do you think that living in the San Francisco Bay Area has influenced your writing in any way? Because most of your stories are set either in the South or in country/rural kinds of areas and I know having grown up here in the Bay Area myself that there is not much country around here. So I just wonder how you made that transition having grown up in the urban and diverse environment that Berkeley and the rest of the Bay Area is.

Cooper: Well I will tell you what I think and that is that there in no time in the cities for some stories to be. To me, in the city all most people think about is love, sex, and having babies. Some people steal and some people lie and to me there is no time for things to unfold. In the cities, people don’t have time to live the stories that people in the country do. Because a minute is a minute in the country. A minute is rushed through in the city, so that their story is different to me. I don’t know. These people just come from the country. And when I write about the city, it still boils down to a community because in the last book I wrote characters traveled to China, France and England, but everybody still ends up in the community.

Bryant: I understand what you mean. I remember reading the story “Vanity”
Cooper: Yes; that was in the city.

Bryant: Right, but the story comes across to the reader as being set in a small town. In fact another thing I have noticed about your short fiction is that there are few dates given. The reader is forced to figures out the time period. They feel like they are contemporary but there is no set date one does not really know.

Cooper: Yeah. I don’t want a date. I try to avoid dates. There are asking me for a date for this last work and I am going to give them the date it ended. Somewhere in the sixties. But I don’t have dates because if I have them people are going to apply those dates to the meaning of the stories and I am writing about stories that have been happening since Adam and Eve. You know “it's not my fault, it's her fault.” Everybody lies! To me history and man have done nothing but change clothes. They didn’t change the inside. We have a variety of people. The same variety of people cause there are only ten Commandments. Man hasn’t devised anything new to do to sin. And the thing that makes a sin a sin is that it is destructive and that’s why God said we shouldn’t do that. It will destroy you. So we have the same things destroying people today that we have under Cleopatra—greed, envy, lies, murder—so what is different, except your clothes and your new modern conveniences? So I don’t like dates cause what I am thinking of is something bigger than this little story. I could never write story about a girl who really wanted a purple ribbon so that she could wear it to the ball, because what’s in that to me? I would rather write about someone who doesn’t have anything. Like in my last book, *The Future Has a Past* (“Filet of Soul”), when she—her mother was a washwoman—and she wanted to go the ball, her prom, but there was absolutely NOTHING to wear. Now you have a problem! Because you know in your heart this kid wants to go. But I like simple stories that depict the struggle. I like the struggle because it's about survival. That’s what it is.
Bryant: Your novels, though, do have a specific setting. *Family*, *In Search of Satisfaction*, and *The Wake of the Wind* are all are set during American slavery or Reconstruction. Why do you choose, or should I say why do you suppose the characters in your novels step out of the periods surrounding American slavery? They come to you and you are able to create “neo slave narratives.”

Cooper: Because that was a great challenge. How do you live through that? And the third novel I wrote, *The Wake of the Wind*? Well you know there was that book *Gone with the Wind*. Well you’ve seen all the turmoil but we were caught in the wake of it. So how do you survive this when everybody hates you and would like to see you dead? Now that’s a hell of a challenge! How do you make it when everybody doesn’t want you to? How does it feel? When a white interviewer asked me, not that white or black makes any difference, but he asked “What did you research on?” I said well I didn’t do any research. I very seldom do. Of course I had some but what would anybody who was slave want? What was to research?

Bryant: Well I remember reading one review on *The Wake of the Wind*, and maybe there is nothing to whether a reviewer or interviewer is white or black, but I distinctly remember his commentary; or should I say complaint, was that all the black people in the novel were good and all the white people were bad, and he felt that was too simplistic.

Cooper: Well it was the truth.

Bryant: Of course I know that is not true. There were some pretty low down black folks in the novel also, but what is your response to his complaint?

Cooper: Well nice white people were very seldom found. There were a few in the novel, but there were not a lot and there were not a lot then!

Bryant: Right.
Cooper: So when I tell you something it's true.

Bryant: In *Family*, the one white character that stood out as kind was --

Cooper: The first wife?

Bryant: Yes; the first wife was kind but I am talking about the brother of the slave owner who could not walk. He was confined to a wheelchair. And I wondered is it that he cannot be evil because he . . .

Cooper: Because he had time to think.

Bryant: Okay. That is what I was wondering because he doesn’t have access to all that his whiteness, especially during this period, could bring him. He didn’t have the opportunity to develop that kind of . . .

Cooper: Yes, and maybe he just had a kind heart. People who have been through some problems usually do have a little more kindness. Of course they can be hateful too. Some people just have a kind heart because he was nice. And also he loved that lady a little bit. You know the woman he was teaching how to “A B C”?

Bryant: Poon?

Cooper: Yeah. And of course when you love somebody it changes your heart. But yeah there were some nice white people. In fact in some of my stories I say that I know that there are some nice white people somewhere. They just don’t live around here. Because that’s the fact. There are some. You know it. But listen, if white people were nice, we would not have fought all these hundred years to get to vote. I mean I am not fussing but--

Bryant: No. I understand what you are saying.

Cooper: And then somebody else said, about *The Wake of the Wind*, that every time you look around somebody is getting married and just pick up people off of the road. Well this is a white
person that wrote this and they don’t know anything about the fact that black people have been
watching white people get married. And we had to jump over a broom and then somebody could
sell your wife or your husband. So your first opportunity to get married in front of a preacher
meant you were REALLY married. Well when didn’t they dream of that? And the second thing
is that they had taken your mother, your father, your sisters and your brother, so you had no
family. So you held on to who cared about you. And they became Uncle Jim or Aunt Mary. So
maybe that reviewer didn’t understand it, but I did.

Bryant: I did too.

Cooper: (laughs) And then those two people that came by there that didn’t want to work, just
wanted to eat, they were black. They were not so good.

Bryant: But they still helped them.

Cooper: Yeah they helped them on over to the church. (Laughter) You know, my daughter says
that one of the reasons some white people may not like my books is because they are not filled
with what white people are doing all the time, they are filled with what black people are doing.
All these black people that I write about have a life. So in The Wake of the Wind, for example,
white people are on the edges. They are not the center. For many black people that is what
survival has meant.

Bryant: Why do Family and The Wake of the Wind open in Africa?

Cooper: Because when black people think of their past, of their history, they think only of
slavery. That is all they see. Black people need to know that we had a history before slavery.
We were something before slavery, something grand! That is why I start before slavery so they
know where they came from. In The Wake of the Wind I started with the longhorns in Texas.
White people wanted some body to come and raise those longhorn cattle. They wanted a skilled
people. We had skills. We had a culture. I just wondered why black people always thought slave when somebody brought up black history. Slavery is not where we began.

Bryant: Who have been some of your favorite writers? Who do you feel has influenced your writing most significantly?

Cooper: Well I mainly look to someone for the beauty of their words. I love Shakespeare. I love Alice Walker. I love Octavia Butler. She writes a different kind of book, but I love her words. But I have never loved anyone’s style. I have dyslexia and so lots of things I learn, I forget. Certain words in particular I just forget. I know them. I know that I know them, but I can’t think of them. So I had to write what I could think of. So I didn’t have words like the people I loved. Like the writing I loved. So that I just had to let these people speak and I just did it like they said it. I listen to some reviewers and they sometimes speak of the voice being the same. Well to me the voice is not the same. Look at the stories. What you listenin’ to? I didn’t hear the same story. So I said it’s the English. It’s the language.

Bryant: Oh, I see what you mean. I’ve heard critics say that.

Cooper: So I said, well, I will just make the English better. So there I was with the dictionary. Always looking up the same words over and over, but the stories did not stay as good. If I don’t use the people that come that’s wrong. They don’t speak very good English but I write that because I am hearing it and I know what to do. And I have this theory. There is a reason they don’t use perfect English. See, I don’t like lies. And the better your English is the more ambiguous you can be. When you can’t say anything but a few words you have to speak directly to the point.

Bryant: I see. There is truth in that.
Cooper: Also the Bible has influenced me most of all. I like the wisdom. I like the truth. So it wasn’t a writer, it was truth. When you look around and see people making so many mistakes and you know that if they just changed one little thing everybody would be happier.

Bryant: The right choice. I have used that term so many times in reference to your work but I believe that the message of your words is simply that people need to understand the life-affirming or life-destroying power of choice.

Cooper: That is true.

Bryant: Okay. Because I see that idea moving through all of your novels and short stories. We all have choices. And if we choose to go the wrong way there is still the opportunity to stop and choose a different path.

Cooper: That is right. That is what God gave us... choice.

Bryant: In an interview with Rebecca Carroll (in I Know What the Red Clay Looks Like) you state that as a child you used to sit and listen to old people for hours as they talked about wisdom. Is that why so many of the characters in your short fiction are older women?

Cooper: Well, probably because I am one and that is who comes to see me. But see, I can’t write without a source. For instance in Family, when she [Clora] was in ether, how could I have found out what was happening in Scotland and all these places if somebody had not been able to see. How could I know? This makes sense to me. This is how my mind reasons. How do I know it happened? But if somebody tells me, then I know it happened. That’s why I don’t like to gossip. If you don’t know then you don’t know. But if they tell me, then that is what I can go on. So old people usually have watched things happen for a long time. And I can get a kid. I’d love a kid’s perspective but they can give me all the questions and some of their opinions. But it's those old people... you know how people used to say “you goin down the wrong road.”
Well those old people have watched that road a long time. And usually they can tell you about people. And I need somebody who knows.

Bryant: Yeah. That’s where the wisdom is. That's what I believe.

Cooper: That right.

Bryant: Well do you have a specific audience in mind when you write?

Cooper: No. I start with me and I start with people who need to know. And that is why I don’t often pay attention to reviewers because number one they don’t understand. And number two? Well . . . for example, when President Bush had me to the White House, and I was to talk to these guests that night, Tom Brokaw, Larry King, and all these big people. This audience was totally rich and my stuff is written for unlearned and un-everything! People with no education . . . no money. So I said, “What am I going to say to these people?” I didn’t realize that they have as much trouble as poor people trying to be real and find some happiness. Like in In Search of Satisfaction. So instead of reading them a story like “100 Dollars or Nothing” I should have just read them the forward to In Search of Satisfaction which is really grand. But they told me to do that. When they told me that I said I’m going to be one of the only black people there and they trying to cut me down to one minute while everybody else will have fifteen minutes. You see. That was bad thinking. But I am being greedy. I am thinking I want all of my time. So I messed my time up by reading something that was totally irrelevant. Those people needed to learn what was in the In Search of Satisfaction forward. They are just as pitiful as anybody else.

Bryant: That is the story that provides your take on the Three Little Pigs?

Cooper: Yes. And also it teaches whatever you do it's your stuff. You cannot blame your momma, your daddy, your husband, or anybody else. It's your life.

Bryant: That is important.
Cooper: And I should have said that! So what I am saying is that I am writing to people who have no way... people who are struggling. People who need to know that little bit.

Bryant: I started reading your fiction in the early nineties, when I was in my very early twenties. My mother was reading your work also and she loved it. She still does.

Cooper: That's the nice thing about those books. Adults and young people like it.

Bryant: Yes! And when I was 22, my mother who is eighteen years my senior surely had a different perspective on the stories, yet we both enjoyed reading them.

Cooper: But they are very plain.

Bryant: Yes they are. But what I am would like to know is why do you suppose that women such as my mother and mother in law who are "everyday women," not college educated professors, find such value in your work, while academia has not? It seems that your work touches average readers. Is that your intention?

Cooper: Well, I don't write science fiction and other fantasy works. It has to be real. Now I am not putting down science fiction because there are some writers that I love. But when you are talking about living life how you gon' give them something they can never get a hold of? I write about people getting hold of what they can get hold of. When I read works by other writers I enjoy it if there is a good story. But you can't go to far out on me because what I have to live is what I need to know. I don't need to know about somebody with three legs coming down in a flying saucer. I don't believe it. I need to believe it. Just like people who say they have died and gone to heaven. Some may have gone through tunnel, but anyone who says there are roses and waterfalls are only naming something on earth. They ain't been nowhere. (Laughter)

Bryant: Well how is that any different that Clora existing in the ether?
Cooper: Well Clora didn’t know why she was there. She wanted to rest. She was stuck there. But still what she is talking about is down to earth. She is not talking about life up there in ether. She is in many ways grounded.

Bryant: Yes, Clora is very down to earth. Another common criticism is that your writing is too didactic and very preachy. Some will say you are beating the reader over the head with your preachiness. What is your response to those allegations?

Cooper: Well, Terry McMillan said I am didactic but that I am one her favorite writers. I met Maya Angelou one time and she said, “I collect all your books.” I said “well what happened? Why am I not on Oprah’s show yet?” (Laughter) I mean really. Nine books, and I am still broke. And I have had writers tell me that I am the best kept secret in the United States.

Bryant: I could believe that.

Cooper: Everybody loves me, but nobody knows about me. And then when Mrs. Bush had me to the White House I thought she had validated me because she was trying to say, “I know you write.” And when she had me to the governor’s mansion before Bush was president she had me in the same company as many well-known writers. But other than that I don’t know that people know that I write. And yet I have people tell me that their grandmother stole my book from them when they were not home. But anyway, the reason why they are so didactic and preachy is because I believe in God. My main belief is that God said feed my sheep. And he was not talking about food for the stomach. He was talking about food for the mind and the soul. That is why the Bible says “The truth shall set you free.”
Vita

Cynthia Lynell Downing Bryant is a native of Oakland, California. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1992. In 1995, she earned a Master of Arts degree in English (specialization in composition) at The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio. She has served as an English instructor at Southern University for nine years where she has taught courses in composition and African American literature. She will receive the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from Louisiana State University in December 2004.