An Examination of Secrecy in Twentieth-Century African American Literature

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AN EXAMINATION OF SECRECY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the legacy of secrecy, silences, and the unspoken in twentieth-century African American literary texts. Using a range of texts representing various eras within the genre of African American literature, this dissertation contends that secrecy is a trope and may be attributed to inherited, maintained traditional practices from West and West Central Africa. Having read a number of African American texts and connecting my personal experiences with these works, I noticed a pattern of withheld discourse throughout.

Most notably, Leslie Lewis’s *Telling Narratives* posits a reason for this trope by examining earlier narratives, specifically nineteenth-century African American texts. She argues the master/slave relationship as the prevailing reason for the secretive motif. Yet, traditional and
cultural practices noted in early African publications demonstrate that Africans were keeping secrets prior to their diasporic scatterings. By examining early West African-derived works, as well as nineteenth-century African American texts, I ground my position that secrecy as we see it evolves from or relates to early signifying and language manipulations, particular to African-derived people. Thus, the early works connect sustained homeland ties to the literature that follows, providing an explanation for the secrecy reflected in African American literature.

This study highlights three types of secrets: identity, family, and sexual, all of which are interrelated and, out of one, the other type may result. The texts that best demonstrate these silences are James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Nella Larsen’s *Passing*; James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*; and Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* and Lalita Tademy’s *Cane River*. Each text group corresponds with a secret type.

Overall, this dissertation challenges the notion that secrecy as a trope in African American literature limits itself to the master/slave relationship in the United States. The previously mentioned texts highlight a direct link to West and West Central African traditions maintained after the Middle Passage. Hence, these preserved homeland customs, including secrecy, are reflected in twentieth-century African American literature.

INDEX WORDS: African Spirituality, Alice Walker, Cane River, Corregidora, Community, Elizabeth Keckley, Erotic, Family, Gayl Jones, Harriet Wilson, Identity, James Baldwin, James Weldon Johnson, Lalita Tademy, Middle Passage, Nella Larsen, Olaudah Equiano, Passing, Phillis Wheatley, Secrecy, Signifyin(g), Sexual, Sundiata
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DEDICATION

For the living-dead and long-dead ancestors, especially my grandparents. I write their beloved names into history: Mr. and Mrs. Wesley and Mary Lee Moore, and Ms. Carolyn Spencer.
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First, I recognize God for keeping me throughout this arduous, yet fulfilling process. I could not have completed this academic journey without His grace and mercy.

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INTRODUCTION

The expression “art imitates life” is no exception in African American culture. Better yet, perhaps it is most obvious in the African American literary tradition, specifically with the lasting tradition of coded language, muted speech, signifyin(g), and secrecy. In many instances, these language manipulations subvert or undermine institutions that the African-derived individuals seek to resist. Just as African American experiences are multifaceted and complex, so too are the manners in which information becomes skewed or withheld. For example, we witness these complexities involved in Maya Angelou’s autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). While in court testifying her rape against her mother’s boyfriend and her attacker Mr. Freeman, an eight-year old Marguerite contemplates how she will undermine the prosecutor’s overwhelming questions: “I didn’t want to lie, but the lawyer wouldn’t let me think, so I used silence as a retreat. . . I couldn’t say yes and tell them how [Mr. Freeman] had loved me once for a few minutes and how he had held me close . . . My uncles would kill me and Grandmother Baxter would *stop speaking*, as she often did when she was angry [emphasis mine]” (70). In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Audre Lorde’s family attempt to shield her from the realities of racial discrimination at an ice cream parlor: “No one would answer my questions with anything other than a guilty silence” (70). We witness Natasha Trethewey’s silences when she speaks to her incarcerated brother, Joe, in *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (2010): “I am keeping a silence to protect myself from knowing. So often this is what the silences—in families as well as in the public discourse of difficult events—are all about: *If something isn’t spoken*, it isn’t fully known, and we can absolve ourselves of the responsibility
that knowing entails [emphasis mine]” (102). There are countless instances throughout African American literature that highlight the unspoken.

Manipulating language and withholding information does not limit itself to the literature. Secrecy resonates in the stage plays of Hollywood producer, director, writer, actor Tyler Perry. In *Madea’s Big Happy Family* (2010), a troubled female character reveals her molestation at the hands of an uncle. This sexual assault produces a special needs child. The child eventually grows up and discovers that the person he thinks is his birth mother is actually his grandmother, and the person he understands as his sister is his biological mother. Even world-renown celebrity fails to alter the lasting effects of cultural silences. Take Oprah Winfrey’s discovery of her long lost sister, Patricia, for instance. Winfrey’s mother, Vernita Lee, failed to inform Winfrey of the child she’d relinquished years before. Lee states, “I thought it was a terrible thing for me to do, that I had done, gave up my daughter when she was born’” (Babwin). Lee notes that she was unable to care for Patricia.

Patricia refused to reveal her familial connection to the media, desiring only to inform Winfrey of their kinship. She did so to shield Winfrey from the public humiliation: “Patricia said she didn’t consider revealing that she and Winfrey were half-sisters to anyone but Winfrey, explaining that she did not want to hurt Winfrey” (Babwin). This secretive phenomenon manifests from an investigative standpoint as well. Some members within the African American community may witness an injustice and refuse to reveal information or to provide official statements to the authorities. Within African American subcultures, this resistance to speak to authorities is labeled the “no snitch” defense.
Of the numerous literary, artistic, and public examples of African Americans remaining silent or of discovering some devastating secret, none resonate more to me than my own. As an African American, I too, share the collective experience of discovering withheld information. This type of revelation echoes the many experiences I have heard among members within the African American community. In other words, this culture of silence tends to rest within African American culture, which spills over into African American literary works and other works of art.

In my own case, there were secrets that shaped my life and my relationship with family long before they were revealed to me. The mode of revelation came by way of a casual conversation with a relative over dinner. I discovered that, like Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a well-respected relative committed what the Igbo consider a “female” crime, an accident against another revered family member. Years later, another family secret revealed itself, only this time via a conversation at an impromptu family gathering. These events and others like it are evidently typical because as in life and in the literature, secrets and silences run rampant in African American culture. Thus, the focus of this study stems from a personal need to explore what initially seemed a generational culture of silence with my own family’s secrets. Yet, I soon realized that secrecy, like many cultural transports, is not particular to my personal experience. Secrecy is everywhere within African American culture. This cultural reflection of secrecy shows up as a motif in African American literature.

This dissertation examines the tradition of secrecy in twentieth-century African American literature. Since secrecy is present in earlier texts and within other genres, this study considers earlier West African-derived works, as well as nineteenth-century African American texts. These early works reveal a point of origin for the continuation and evolution of the language
manipulation leading to twentieth-century African American texts. The focus within twentieth-century texts ranges from turn-of-the-century to turn-of-the-millennium works, specifically James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982), Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975), and Lalita Tademy’s *Cane River* (2001). Not only do these particular works demonstrate a range in publication dates, themes, and complexities within African American literature overall, they further reveal a clearly recognizable theme of secrecy within African American culture. Specifically, these texts best demonstrate an ongoing treatment of secret identities, family secrets, sexual secrets, and interrelated dynamics, specifically as they relate to ancestral connections. These works interrogate the realities of passing, the conflicts within families, and the politics of sex, all which either depend on secrecy or have secrecy at the core. Johnson and Larsen best highlight secret identity, while Baldwin and Walker best highlight family secrets. Although Jones’s and Tademy’s texts both elucidate the generational complexities and politics of sex within slavery, they do so in different ways. Jones’s novel demonstrates Ursa’s ancestors’ extreme political resistance to their lots. Tademy’s text showcases a continuation of the all three secret categories due to sexual politics, some of which are the results of slavery’s legacy. In other words, the secret types may be linked because identity connects to family, and families may be established (or destroyed) due to sexual interactions, either consensual or forced. The previously mentioned works and other African American texts question why secrecy is so prevalent. An explanation rests in the idea that ancestral practices continued in spite of Africans’ geographic displacement. Therefore despite intended theme or focus, these authors’ works demonstrate secrecy as a cultural transport that survived the Mid-
dle Passage. Thus, twentieth-century African American novels may be read for their secret motifs.

Critical Background: Maintained Cultural Practices

From the first known publication to the most contemporary offerings, lasting motifs of secrecy, silence, and the unspoken resonate throughout the works written by people of African descent. Hints of words that whisper, suggest, signify, or mask truths inundate African American literature, whether in fiction, nonfiction, or poetry. Some critics attribute this on-going clandestine characteristic to the lasting effects of the legacy of slavery in the United States. With the onset of chattel slavery, African and African American slaves kept certain secrets, those that, if revealed, could lead to the separation of their families, thus destroying what was left of their lives. Former slave, Frederick Douglass, highlights the lack of information regarding his paternity and the thwarted relationship with his mother. He states, “My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage. The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me. My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant. . .[emphasis mine]” (923). Babacar M’Baye confirms Douglass’ passage, noting that “there was the practice of ‘concubinage’ and separation of slaves from their families. These restrictions show that slavery violated the sanctity of black family” (169). As a way to attempt to keep their families or community as stable as circumstances would allow, many African slaves were thought to withhold information in order to survive (Boyd-Franklin 332). This is just one explanation, however, because a number of African American texts highlight intricate secrecies.
Ishmael Reed offers his perspective on this topic as well, connecting slaves’ lots as chattel to this silent legacy. He posits that slave masters’ perceptions of slaves as mere property contributed to this culture of silence. Reed states, “When you begin to understand that most slave masters viewed their slaves as cattle or livestock, then you begin to understand why so much of slave religious practices and African derived culture had to be communicated secretly” (qtd. in Young 4). Reed further notes that early legal slave statutes continued to reinforce silence, particularly the Black Codes of 1661, which “legitimized slavery as an institution” in Virginia, thus affecting communication as the “language and linguistic itself became endangered” (5). Reed’s implication aligns with M’Baye’s assertion regarding the institution of slavery and the secret legacy. Furthermore, secrecy and slavery tend to coexist or to evolve, one from the other.

Most recent, Leslie Lewis reiterates the history of secrecy in early African American texts. Her publication titled *Telling Narratives: Secrets in African American Literature* (2007) contends that secrets are a part of African American literature due to the slavery legacy in the United States. Within her study, Lewis shares her critical model of the study of secrets, noting that they “shape the structure of African American narratives—of what gets said to whom and how. Secret telling, which might be best characterized as that kind of telling that depends on a third party who hears, and implies a second party who does not, becomes a recognizable structure within African American narrative literature” (3). With this model, Lewis highlights two types of secrets that manifest from the slave experience—those from the slave and those from the master. This master/slave relationship, Lewis argues, grounds secrecy in African American literature.
These points benefit the study of secrecy and the telling of secrets as a critical way to comprehend a significance of early African American texts. However, as Michael Gomez posits in *Exchanging Our Country Marks* (1998), “Westerners label whatever they do not understand about non-Western societies and cultures as secretive and mystical; hence, the most important aspect of a phenomenon is its impenetrability or resistance to explication along conventional lines of analysis. There are many secretive institutions in the West...” (94-95). Thus, African American experiences with secrecy in the United States cannot be limited to their association with chattel slavery. With cultural similarities in West African and West Central African societies and in the respective literatures, the most logical conclusion situates secrecy as a trope in African-derived cultures before the master/slave experience of chattel slavery. In other words, Africans were keeping similar traditions prior to their illegal transport via the Middle Passage. Similar to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who assigns literary value to those black works that continued to employ Eurocentric literary traditions, but with a “black difference that manifests itself in specific language use (xxiii), I find that secrecy is one of those repetitions in African American literature. Based on the homeland blueprint, secrets became and continue to become a recognizable structure in African American literature, maintained despite location or transport.

**African Worldview and Religion**

Wole Soyinka’s *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (1976) elucidates the African existence in African literature outside of a Western perspective, one that “habitually reflects the abandonment of a belief in culture...” (38). Therefore, we may link transported and maintained African traditions by considering an African worldview. As noted in *African American Psychology: From Africa to America* (2006), a worldview grounds the thought processes and ac-
tions of a peoples’ lives: “Worldviews provides us with guidelines for living: They affect our perceptions, thoughts, feelings, inferences, and behaviors and how we experience the external world” (Belgrave and Allison 27). With an African worldview, one that privileges the core beliefs, ideals, and practices that African-derived people tend to value, we can better recognize the origins of the secret motif in African American literature, beginning with religion.

John Mbiti’s *Introduction to African Religion* (1975) offers a comprehensive exploration of what he calls African Religion. ¹ Within his text, Mbiti highlights the fundamentals of African beliefs, customs, practices, and spiritualities (or African Religion overall), as a viable way to recognize the various legacies of African peoples by privileging African worldviews. Although comprised of and practiced by various peoples within this vast continent, African Religion, also known as African Traditional Religion, is complex and operates within five inclusive parts: 1. beliefs; 2. practices, ceremonies, and festivals; 3. religious objects and places; 4. values and morals; and 5. religious officials and leaders (11-12). Each element works in concert with the rest to comprise African Religion.

Mbiti contends that religion is always at the forefront of all African peoples; that is, religion is their customary worldview (14). This religion follows Africans wherever they may journey. Mbiti notes, “We cannot understand the African heritage without understanding its religious past. Religion is found in all African peoples . . . .Through the ages, therefore, religion has been for Africans the normal way of looking at the world and experiencing life itself. For that reason it is found wherever people are. It is integrated so much into different areas of life . . . [emphasis mine]” (14). Recognizing this perspective as a starting point in comprehending cul-

¹ Mbiti’s usage of African Religion as a proper noun will be maintained in this study.
tural transports clearly helps us better consider the preservation of culture, regardless of Afri-
can peoples’ various displacements.

Albert J. Raboteau corroborates Mbiti’s position, noting Africans’ ability to combine el-
ements from African Religion with that of the colonizers’. Ultimately, early New World Africans
created what would later be recognized as the beginnings of an African American worship expe-
rience (*Canaan Land* 12). These modifications demonstrate what the enslaved Africans did not,
or perhaps *could not*, abandon, even under the colonizer’s rule. Instead, they revised continen-
tal practices and beliefs to suit them, which has become another trait particular within the Afri-
can American experience. Raboteau summarizes this cultural melding and suggests that it was
not altogether without deliberations. He states, “Precisely because of their adaptability, African
religions could embrace new gods and new rituals without losing their fundamental character.
It was their ability to change that allowed them to maintain continuity with Africa in the slave
societies of America” (13). We may see these revisions in African-derived worship services
across denominations.

Similarly, Gomez’s *Diasporic Africa* (2006) addresses the need for an Africanist interpre-
tation to validate what he calls the “ongoing relevance” of people of African descent in the di-
aspora (5). Since little recognition has been given to the cultural complexities of various ethnici-
ties and of their preserved traditions within African American literature, Gomez’s study rein-
forces the perspective that argues the transportation of those indigenous cultural practices,
specifically those that deal with silences. He writes,

> Of course, there were many other cultural insignia *maintained by Africans
and their descendants* in the slaveholding Americas that harkened back to
Africa. They could certainly be identified in the music and closely related
dance forms, and both music and dance were intimately connected to
religion [. . .] Even a cursory review of the foodways introduced into the
Americas by Africans serves to reinforce the notion of sustained ties
within the Atlantic world [emphasis mine]. (9)

One of the sustained ties concerns the integration of secrecy within African American
culture. We may further see this continuation in the various organizations established by peo-
ple of African descent throughout the diaspora. For example, Gomez cites freemasonry as a
maintained homeland link in which we see African influences, thus its appeal among African-
derived men. Gomez states, “Freemasonry. . . cannot be construed as solely western in origin,
nor can all of the factors compelling persons of African descent to embrace Freemasonry be
reduced to developments in the New World. Rather, cultural antecedents in Africa itself also
contributed to Freemasonry’s popularity among the African-descended population” (Black
Crescent 238). Additionally, secret groups were thought to be used as attempts to combat and
to resist slavery. O. R. Dathorne’s Dark Ancestor (1981) notes that “. . . there were obvious sur-
vivals of African cults in the form of secret societies, which proved useful bastions against sla-
v-ery. . . During the nineteenth century, brotherhood cults were founded exclusively for buying
freedom” (6). Thus with secret societies, we may see a continuation of the homeland influences
throughout the New World.

Gomez further records the influence of West and West Central Africa within African
American culture. With “more than 50 percent” of African imports from the Bight of Biafra and
the Gold Coast (Diasporic Africa 33), we may see direct cultural echoes within African American
identity and culture. Reed makes the case for what he calls this “African derived culture” among the slaves, which was passed on to the rest of the slave culture (qtd. in Young 4). The point here is that the

African diaspora [is] vitally and inextricably linked to the histories, cultures, and communities of Africa [and] is at least as valid as the notion of a black Atlantic that effectively excludes the continent . . . with the inclusion of an Africa that is fully participatory throughout each phase of its development, from the dawn of the transatlantic slave trade to the present [emphasis mine]. (Gomez, Diasporic Africa 4)

Thus, the mere act of transporting and displacing Africans failed to destroy what was already embedded—that is for this study, a culture of silence.

Therefore, if Africans transferred various types of cultural signifiers, they would also transmit their practices of secrecy and other forms of withheld discourse within the literature. To echo Mbiti’s point regarding African Religion, these practices are all interrelated. And, Gomez affirms that “. . . secrecy is important and was maintained. . .” (Exchanging Our Country Marks 95). If these points are considered, secrecy as a recognizable structure in African American literature cannot solely be dependent on or validated only by a master/slave relationship. A consideration must be made for secrecy’s link to ancestral practices. Overall, the attention given to the specifics of secrecy as a theme within African American culture has either been too minimal or merely simplified as particular to the master/slave relationship or to the legacy of slavery. This study assigns secrecy in African American literature to pre-Middle Passage and
transported cultural practices such as circumlocution, signifyin(g) and other language manipulations related to silences. Secrecy, then, connects to the homeland echoes of the ancestors.

These ideas stress that secrecy and silence present in African American literature originate even earlier than the Trans-Atlantic and American slave experiences. With the secret societies in ancient West Africa and West Central Africa, and with cultural and communal nuances, these silences and secretive traditions must have journeyed with those Africans who were victims of the Middle Passage. According to Nancy Boyd-Franklin, African Americans’ secrets are rooted in their pasts via their African heritage. She notes that “[s]ecrets’ were special knowledge related to rituals, healing, protection, and life events [emphases mine]” (332). Therefore, we may surmise that secrets and silences as a literary tradition in African American literature stem from more than just the slavery legacy in the United States.

This study uncovers an ancestral, historical, and spiritual explanation of secrecy’s familiar presence within African American literature. This dissertation considers the silences that may be attributed to ancestral practices. Thus secrecy consciously or subconsciously came with displaced Africans and were not merely master/slave related. Even when there is no traditional master/slave relationship, the practice of silences and verbal omissions continues throughout the literature. One reason these sustained echoes continue to surface is because of the ancestral presence in African-based communities and the art of subversion. We must consider the legacy of culturally ingrained silences and subversive language because the types of secrets found in the literature evolve from them. These verbal manipulations may have transformed over time into those recognizable structures that many critics have examined, alone or as originating with the master/slave experience. Lewis specifies earlier narratives for which the legacy
of secrecy may be read. Yet, this study shows that West African-based works begin the oral/written tradition while nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts continue the tradition. Overall, this research highlights the treatment of muted speech in African American literature based on its connection to past inherited practices.

Equally significant are early slave narratives that highlight the pre-Middle Passage experience. Works such as the *Autobiography of Omar ibn Said, Slave in North Carolina* (1831), James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw’s *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (1770), and *The Autobiography of Nicholas Said; a Native of Bornou, Eastern Soudan, Central Africa* (1873) record the cultural practices of African natives and reflect those “African reminiscences” that undoubtedly traveled with those natives who were displaced (qtd. in Omar Said, *Autobiography* 788). As the early correspondences regarding Said suggest, these memories are deeply rooted in them.

Yet, Said provides his disclaimer, as did most slave narratives, regarding his own story, noting his “deficiencies” in composing in the Christian language and his inability to remember details. He writes, “You asked me to write my life. I am not able to do so because I have much forgotten my own, as well as the Arabic language. . .” (792). If we consider circumlocution and the coded language that Africans were immersed in, these omissions are arguably the result of Said’s cultural practice in the art of concealment, subversion, and resistance. His disclaimer may initially be read as a slave narrative’s literary tradition, but from an African worldview, it clearly echoes the griot’s sentiment that “forgetting” may also serve as an act of resistance.
More recent than the previous selections, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1959) sheds light on this study because it provides a more contemporary example of the continuation of the unspoken and further links the West African and African American literary traditions. Similar to Said, Achebe chooses what he will share with the reader on pre-colonial Igbo customs and secret practices. He simultaneously highlights the resulting destruction from the colonizers’ arrival and the clan’s split. Throughout the novel, Achebe uses culturally specific parables, riddles, and songs to reinforce the practices particular to his countrymen. In lieu of providing direct connections, Achebe demonstrates silence and coded language to those uninitiated in the culture, including the general readership. An early instance of the unspoken occurs when Okonkwo’s second wife, Ekwefi, has trouble finding the words to express how Okonkwo nearly kills her during the Week of Peace. When a friend asks her about this incident, Ekwefi notes, “I cannot yet find a mouth with which to tell the story” (48).

Perhaps one of the most crucial and communal examples of the unspoken occurs as Okonkwo and five other clansmen are summoned to meet with the District Commissioner to discuss their participation in burning the missionaries’ church. While in this meeting, the clansmen are imprisoned. Upon the commissioner asking if the clansmen have anything to say about the imposed fine or about their potential fates, none of them answered. Achebe writes, “The six men remained sullen and silent. . . Even when the men were left alone they found no words to speak to one another” (194-95). Most evident is that not only does this scene concern the trauma and resulting shame, both of which contribute to the legacy of silences that may lead to similarities found within African American experiences, but this scene also demonstrates the verbal resistance that the captives collectively used via their silence, particularly with the Dis-
strict Commissioner. Achebe’s use of silences throughout his text demonstrates the subversive nature of language in West African settings. We may see this type of language manipulation as related to secrecy as a motif found within twentieth century African American literature.

Connecting to Twentieth Century African American Literature

To continue the link between an African worldview, African Religion and culture, earlier native-based texts, and twentieth century African American literature, this study devotes chapter one to literary works from West African authors that directly influence African American literature based on coded, manipulative language. These works include D.T. Niane’s *Sundialta: An Epic of Old Mali* (1965), Phillis Wheatley’s poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773), and Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789). To show earlier examples of the maintained culture in the United States, this study considers nineteenth century works that revoice the West African sentiments found in Wheatley and Equiano’s works, specifically signifyin(g). They are Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig Or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black in a Two-Story White House. North. Showing that Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There* (1859) and Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868). Within these works, Wilson and Keckley demonstrate that they reinvent and revise themselves as women of color within institutions that sought to define them. Thus, all of these earlier echoes of showcase the power of using covert language to undermine and to establish agency of their literary voices.

Chapter two begins the study of secrecy in twentieth century African American literature. It examines secrecy related to race passing in James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929). These texts highlight racial am-
bigness and explore gender-specific treatment to interrogate the disparity between the types of access available for men and women. Johnson and Larsen use the transport of trickery as a subversive means to continue the secret legacy.

Chapter three focuses on family secrecy and Western religion in James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982). Both novels show the potential destruction resulting from holding family and communal secrets, as well as the healing power of potentially revealing them. The texts further demonstrate the conflict between Christianity and African spirituality, as well as a motive for secrecy overall—protecting established family units.

The fourth chapter explores sexual secrecy and its interconnectedness to identity and family in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975) and Lalita Tademy’s *Cane River* (2001). These novels share the complexities of chattel slavery and its lasting effects on the individual female characters’ histories. Specifically, Jones and Tademy interrogate the politics of sex and the manner in which their female characters somehow undermine oppression via African-derived trickery and their erotic female power. Some of the female characters use their perceived powerlessness as objects in a racist, patriarchal setting, as power to secure their family legacies.

To conclude this study, I connect each text group to its theme within the secret categories of identity, family, and sexual secrets. This section also highlights the significance of my findings based on historic consensus and critical assessments of transplanted traditions and ancestral experiences. Utilizing a historical approach and literary theory to discuss the complexities found within African American literature, I specify secrecy as thematic in twentieth-century
African American literature due to transported African-derived practices. I end these findings with a discussion on the importance of family within African American literature and culture.

Therefore, this study is pertinent to twentieth-century African American literature because it moves beyond a discussion of secrecy’s dependence on a master/slave relationship, as Lewis’s scholarship dictates. This research considers the writings of some of the earliest transports and compares their works to earlier African American texts. These comparisons perform two duties—(1) they reveal secrecy’s independence from the master/slave dynamic; and (2) demonstrate the evolution of secrecy within African American literature as a continued homeland practice. Hence, this dissertation credits the coded, muted, and secret legacy to African-derived people, indigenous to West and West Central Africa. These silent practices traveled with the captives who survived the Middle Passage, and as a result of these cultural transfers, secrecy resonates in the culture and the literature.
COVERT LANGUAGE: WEST AFRICAN LITERARY INFLUENCES ON EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN RE-CREATIONS OF SELF

Since African American literature reflects its various cultures, it must also mirror those sustained homeland practices. Therefore, to connect this study of African American literature to the legacy of secrecy, we must first look to the literature that provides insight on the origins of its cultural practices. Although the scholarship notes the many transported practices, we must also consider what would ultimately be the makings of the African living in America, who would continue those traditions. Michael Gomez notes that “[t]he transformation of the African into African American actually began on African soil. Africans chosen for the fateful transatlantic voyage all experienced the barracoon phase of the exchange” (Exchanging Our Country Marks 155). Prior to the seasoning that occurred while enslavers held Africans hostage in slave pens, we can see in earlier works evidence that reveals the beginnings of literary agency. D.T. Niane’s translation of Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali (1965), Phillis Wheatley’s poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773), and Olaudah Equiano’s text The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African (1789) provide the necessary foundation to demonstrate the coded, muted, and secretive ancestral practices that continued to resonate in early African American literature.

1.1 West African Foundations and Language Manipulations

Although some readers may question the inclusion of this early literature because it does not demonstrate secrecy as trope in clear and direct discourse, we should consider what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., says about black writing and its purpose. He states, “Whereas black writ-
ers most certainly revise texts in the Western tradition, they often seek to do so ‘authentically,’ with a black difference, a compelling sense of difference based on the black vernacular’’ (xxii).

One difference in black writing may be attributed to the manner in which Africans conveyed what they wanted those initiated in their various cultures to know—they spoke it only to them. In other words, oral tradition was privileged over the written word. Prior to the coded language we see throughout the literature, we may overlook secrecy in the West African-based writers’ works. An explanation for this perceived lack may be due to oral tradition. D.T. Niane’s translation of *Sundiata* echoes this notion, noting that griots were the keepers of royal legacies and all learning should come from them only (viii).

F.W. Butt-Thompson’s *West African Secret Societies* confirms this notion, He states that West Africans “made their societies the repositories of the folklore, myths and history and the conceptions of art and culture and learning and wisdom the tribes possessed. Moreover, they became the teachers of these things. The only teachers”(16). Butt-Thompson further notes that West Africans were “regulated by the society’s tenets, but they themselves were of it, initiated into it, and could become even officials of it. This may be why, when forced to migrate or when sold overseas, they planted the ‘banner’ of their society in the midst of their new homes” (17). This statement substantiates that the proclivity for maintaining secrets came with the West African. Thus, within this epic which predates the chattel slave experience, we can see the ancestral tradition and influences of secrecy and assign it more value within the African American experience.

*Sundiata* is the most widely read epic in West Africa, providing the reader with an inside look at the griot’s role in preparing and counseling leaders, rulers, and kings. Within this text,
Niane brings the oral tradition to life via the written word, as the griot chooses to share specifics regarding Sundiata’s lineage, exceptional birth, conquests, and mysterious death. With the characters in the epic, we witness the practice of circumlocution, as well as the importance of secrecy and silences in the oral tradition. Niane notes the significant role of the *griot*. He writes,

[H]e has learnt the art of historical oratory through long years; he is moreover, bound by an oath and does not teach anything except what his guild stipulates, for, say the griots, ‘All true learning should be a secret.’ Also the traditionalist is a master in the art of circumlocution. . .or else he turns facts into amusing legends for the public, which legends have, however, a secret sense which the vulgar little suspect [emphasis mine]. (viii)

Not only does the griot master covert language, the soothsayers do too. For instance, when Sundiata’s father, King Nare Fa Maghan, receives a prophecy that the son he has fathered is not destined to be the future king, the soothsayer responds in abstruse terms. The soothsayer states, “‘King of Mali, destiny marches with great strides, Mali is about to emerge from the night. Nianiba is lighting up, but what is this light that comes from the east?’ ‘Hunter,’ said Gnankouman Doua, ‘your words are obscure. Make your speech comprehensible to us. . .’” (5). Gates notes that this type of circumlocution may also be found in the African American proclivity to signify. Using one of Roger D. Abrahams’ definitions, Gates lists one of the many meanings of *signifyin(g)*. He states, “It can mean ‘the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point’” (75).
Although signifyin(g) is an African American term that derives from Signifying Monkey tales whose origins lie within the institution of slavery (51), the soothsayer may be invoking one of the many forms of Esu. In other words, since The Epic of Sundiata precedes chattel slavery, any form of language revision that occurred may have evolved into what ultimately came to be signifyin(g). Gates states, “These variations speak eloquently of an unbroken arc of metaphysical presupposition and a pattern of figuration shared through time and space among certain black cultures in West Africa, South America, the Caribbean, and the United States” (6). Gates further suggests the Signifying Monkey is indeed Esu’s relative since they both perform similar rhetorical functions (53). Given these connections, we may recognize the revoiced coded, manipulative language that many African-derived writers would ultimately use as subversion.

Further, we must consider the woman who is credited with spearheading not only the creative and imaginative African American literary tradition, but also the literary legacy of secrecy, silences, and unspoken in the United States—Phillis Wheatley. As the first Black woman in the United States to publish a book of poetry, Wheatley’s literary history is central to this study of secrecy. Her poems are, arguably, the best examples of early signification, withholding what she truly may have intended to convey to an audience who would surely miss her underlying points. Transports such as using coded language eventually evolved, catapulting the slave into the great deceiver or actor. According to Raboteau’s Slave Religion, “‘Puttin’ on ol’ massa’ could involve hiding one’s true feelings while simulating the opposite” (297).

In his chapter “The Signifying Monkey and the Language of Signifyin(g),” Gates notes that many women were just as skillful as men in their art of signifyin(g) (54) and that this rhetorical strategy was “the slave’s trope” (52). Of the many descriptions of signifyin(g), most clas-
sify it as a linguistic game, a play on words, or a hidden meaning. Within this figurative lan-
guage specific to the black vernacular used throughout the diaspora, African-derived people
have manipulated the hegemony’s language and made it their own, thus redefining themselves.
Gates makes the case for this language manipulation in poetry. He states,

Meaning. . .is not proffered; it is deferred because the relationship between in-
tent and meaning, between the speech act and its comprehension, is skewed by
the figures of rhetoric and signification. . .Never can [an] interpretation be
definitive, given the ambiguity at work in its rhetorical structures. The speech of
the Monkey exists as a sequence of signifiers, effecting meaning through their
differential relation and calling attention to itself by rhyming, repetition, and
several of the rhetorical figures used in larger cultural language games.
Signifyin(g) epitomizes all of the rhetorical play in black vernacular [emphasis
mine]. (53)

With this Gates’ explanation, we can see how Wheatley’s poetry may be read. She is the Signi-
fying Monkey and her Christian audience/society serves as the signified.

Wheatley’s poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” demonstrates her ability
to maintain her connectedness to her homeland and people, while simultaneously subverting
the written word, the very written word she masters early on, despite being in a foreign envi-
ronment. On the surface, Wheatley expresses perceived gratitude for being “brought” to the
United States, cultivated and saved via Christianity. Readers of Wheatley’s poetry may take this
perceived gratitude lightly, however. She manipulates the language to signify and re-establish
her identity and connectedness to her homeland. She notes: “T’was mercy brought me from my
pagan land/Taught my benighted soul to understand/That there’s a God--that there’s a savior too/Once I redemption neither sought nor knew” (lines 1 and 4). These lines set up and extend Wheatley’s double talk. On the one hand, she seems grateful and relieved. On the other, she draws attention to the fact that her creation of this poem may not have occurred had she not been the victim of the Middle Passage. To note that she had no prior knowledge to seek redemption further suggests that she and the people of her “sable race” did not require it. Their homeland practices and rituals conflicted Christianity’s limitations based on skin color alone, and Wheatley takes her owners’ and the readership’s beliefs to task as she hints at the refinement history and potential of her race: “Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain/May be refin’d and join the angelic train” (7-8).

Furthermore, the rhyme in her poetry may initially be read as adhering to poetic convention of her time. From an Afrocentric perspective, however, Wheatley’s rhyme scheme is indicative of a connection to the trickster figure, the Signifying Monkey. Gates maintains that the poetry of the Signifying Monkey incorporates a familiar stanzaic structure, the rhyming couplet: “The most common structure is the rhyming couplet in an a-a-b-b pattern. . .Rhyming is extraordinarily important in the production of the humorous effect that these poems have and has become the signal indication of expertise. . . The rhythm of the poems is also crucial to the desired effect, an effect in part reinforced by their quasi-musical nature of delivery” (54). Similarly, Wheatley’s poem incorporates the same rhyme scheme and may be read for the same musicality as that of the Signifying Monkey tales. Although unclear whether or not the Signifying Monkey tales would have been aware of Wheatley’s poem or if her rhyme scheme is exclusive to or based in West Africa cultures, the resemblances are uncanny. Despite the per-
ceived loss of African languages, the riddle, as O.R. Dathorne posits, has survived. He notes: 
“. . . few proverbs have survived. . . in Africa the riddle is by nature a statement of paradox or an attempt at reconstructing similarity from apparent dissimilarity, and it survives in the Afro-American dozens recited by adolescent boys and sometimes girls” (68). Since these American dozens are forms of signifyin(g) and these tales are thought to be the products of slavery, Wheatley’s enslavement surely speaks to the plausibility of such a coincidence. Taking Gates’ sentiments as verifiable, we can surmise that either Wheatley signifies upon the signified in the same way as Signifying Monkey, or that the Signifying Monkey tales echo Wheatley’s era.

Moreover, Wheatley demonstrates what Wendy W. Walters argues is an attempt to “redeem the concept of ‘home’” (qtd. in Gomez Diasporic 175). Gomez notes:

Unsatisfied with the binary of home-diaspora, Walters offers the argument that ‘black international prose writing itself performs a home in diaspora.’ Accepting the critique of essentialism, Walters nonetheless rehabilitates notions of (forced) migration, slavery, and empire as embedded in the memories of those in diaspora and culturally expressed. That is, far from some residual of the blood, such memories flow from demonstrably historical processes that continue to reverberate [. . .]. She is attempting to redeem the concept of ‘home’ from the dust bin of certain theorists. Rather than discarding it, Walters calls for a redefinition, a reconceptualization that allows for a multiplicity of locations and a rejection of boundedness. Home then becomes ‘an enacted space’ and diaspora ‘an alternate community.’ (175)
Walters validates international writers such as Wheatley who refused to limit themselves or be bound by their diasporic placement. As a West African native from either Gambia or present-day Senegal, Wheatley and her poetry are imperative to show her contribution to this tradition of silence via her signification. Therefore, her work supports the notion that this coded culture lies within, despite her “cultivation.”

Perhaps the most well-known account of signifyin(g) is Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative*. It offers the reader a firsthand account of the customs and practices associated with Equiano’s native upbringing. In his “Introduction” to Equiano’s narrative, Werner Sollors writes that because of Equiano’s specific recollections of Essaka, researchers have been able to uncover the missing elements that the transport caused: “Edwards and Acholonu have traced and identified features such as scarification, cam wood, and salt made of wood ash, all mentioned in the *Narrative*. Equiano’s memories symbolically bridge the rupture of the Middle Passage” (xiii). Despite claims that he was not born in Essaka, or current-day Nigeria, Equiano’s narrative is noteworthy for its cultural specifics. Equiano grounds his narrative in his homeland’s customs, sharing early recollections of his birth, high rank, and his father’s Igbo chief status, which denotes “the highest distinction and signifying in [his] language a mark of grandeur” (32). Most relevant, however, is Equiano’s coded language throughout the narrative. We see this dual meaning before the narrative begins. From the title, we may recognize Equiano’s play on words--his dual identity. He presents himself as both an African, and as a European, specifically an Englishman. With what W.E.B. DuBois would later term his “two-ness” or “double consciousness,” we may assert that Equiano indeed signifies.
Using two names and highlighting his nationality within his narrative’s title, Equiano relies on Esu, the trickster figure to further bridge the Middle Passage gap. Since Esu serves as the literary interpreter, presented in sculpture form as having two mouths, we may further see the duality in which Equiano writes. Most evident is his use of two names in the title, presenting conflicting identities. Both of these identities present two warring identities—the African and the European—one bound and one free. These nationalities may also represent what Gates calls the tension between the trickster figures Esu and the Signifying Monkey, the tension between the written and the oral (21-22). Since the trickster figure Esu serves as literary critic and the Signifying Monkey privileges the oral, they may further echo Equiano’s duplicitous nature.

Gates also defines Signifyin(g) as “a wide variety of African American verbal games involving ritual insult competition, innuendo, parody, and other forms of loaded expression [emphasis mine]” (42). Since Equiano was immersed in an African-based culture prior to his kidnap, we can be assured that this type of coded language was, as in The Epic of Sundiata, common practice. Also since Gates posits that “blacks have been Signifyin(g), without explicitly calling it that, since slavery” (68), we can imagine that Equiano performed the same language subversions.

Katalin Orban positions Equiano as possessing a “bicultural perspective,” hiding messages throughout his text. She contends that the reader should not necessarily take his narrative at “face value” because Equiano may have “mask[ed] the real message” (657). If Equiano were indeed signifying, as did most African and African Americans who wrote on race relations from the late eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, then his white, British audience would have probably missed this (and other hints) altogether, thus, allowing him to eventually spread his abolitionist message.
Likewise, the two ethnicities Equiano presents are the very same two in direct conflict during the eighteenth century. Equiano may present these ethnic groups to demonstrate the adaptability of the African. This ability to adjust also echoes the etymology of his name. Equiano writes, “I was named Olaudah, which in our language, signifies vicissitude or fortune, also, one favoured [sic], and having a loud voice and well spoken” (27). In addition to these definitions, vicissitude also means mutability. Therefore, while he provides the specifics of his birth, Equiano simultaneously demonstrates that in his culture, names are neither arbitrarily assigned nor meaningless. This coded message may further signify on the randomness of assigning names to the enslaved.

In the same way Esu serves as the “ultimate copula, connecting truth with understanding, the sacred with the profane, the text with interpretation” (Gates 6), Equiano signifies as he situates the European name Gustavus Vassa between his given name Olaudah Equiano and the cultural identifier, “the African.” Under the guise of appealing to the British audience by using a European name, Equiano reinforces the notion that despite perceptions, he is undoubtedly African. Although the lasting impressions of Equiano are that of a British gentleman whose main cause is the abolition of the slave trade in England, his African gentility and civility resonate. Evidence of this authentic self may be seen in the plate of his original book cover (Equiano 3). His African name and cultural identifier are printed in cursive, while his European name is marked by printed font. The significance, here, is that the cursive, handwritten, signature reaffirms his identity as a cultivated African. As proof of one’s identity, a signature verifies a person. Furthermore, if Equiano indeed operates out of Esu, we can see his penmanship as reflective of that intention. Gates states, “Esu is a principle of language, of written discourse particularly”
(22). Thus, a reader of Equiano’s narrative may surely see the cursive penmanship as a way to undermine and reject the European name forced upon him. In this instance, his native name proves most significant; his ethnic identifier “the African” ranks as important to further self-identify with his homeland.

Additionally, his given African name, Olaudah Equiano, precedes his European name, Gustavus Vassa, which he was initially forced to use. As evidenced in the text, “[M]y master and captain named me Gustavus Vassa. . . when I refused to answer to my new name. . . it gained me many a cuff; so at length I submitted. . . [emphasis mine]” (64). We may interpret the order in which Equiano cites his names as a sequence of importance or as one in which his true self lies. Arguably, Equiano mentions the African name first in an effort to signify its importance, its originality, or its veracity over that of the European name. Possibly, he suggests his cultural superiority. The “or” indicated after his African name speaks to these possibilities. Equiano’s reference to the Igbo’s royal civility, as opposed to the Europeans with whom he comes in contact, confirms this inference. Equiano narrates his people’s veneration of others, especially the ancestors, and refrains from profane language and references. He writes, “[W]e never polluted the name of the object of our adoration. . . it was always mentioned with the greatest reverence. . . we were totally unacquainted with swearing, and all those terms of abuse and reproach which finds the way so readily and copiously into the language of more civilized people [italics mine]” (41). In this example, Equiano’s coded language praises his own people. In the same manner as Wheatley, he simultaneously ridicules those Europeans who, by their malicious acts of terrorizing and controlling foreign lands and by their foul mechanisms in which to accomplish this feat, prove to be unworthy of the description of a refined group of people.
To further link his association with civility, Equiano mentions that the Igbos are very concerned with cleanliness; it is a part of their religious belief system (41), unlike the Europeans. Equiano records his surprise when he comes in contact with people who “[eat] without washing their hands” (53). With this description, Equiano clearly ridicules the would-be civilians, showing that their barbaric practices are not limited only to trading human beings for economic gain; they also lack culture. In showing the Igbos’ civility, Equiano catapults them into an arena in which the Europeans, in his view, clearly did not belong.

Unlike uncivilized Europeans, whom Equiano repeatedly referred to as “the uncircumcised” (53), Equiano’s Igbos practiced circumcision, as did the Jews (41), who were god’s “chosen ones.” This comparison of the Jews is very significant because it equates Equiano’s religious customs with those of a Christian God’s children. This analogy would definitely speak to a British audience who had merely heard about Africans’ ways of life. Walvin states that the majority of Europeans possessed only “mythological and hostile” opinions concerning African religious customs (970). Equiano confirms that the Igbos, like the Europeans, believed in “one creator of all things” (40). In comparing the two, Equiano tricks his British audience, soothing its apprehensions of the fear of the African unknown.

Equiano surreptitiously likens his people’s customs to those of the Jews to further signify, as Adam Potkay posits, the universality of the law of retaliation (683). This signification undermines any of the readership’s attempts to discredit the Africans living throughout Europe based solely on their perceived lack of religion. Essentially, Equiano hints that not only had the Jews abided by this law, the Igbos did also. Therefore from a religious point of view, if slaves were to resist, retaliate, or revolt, they would be justified in doing so. By grounding his argu-
ment in Western religious beliefs, Equiano invokes the fear of retaliation (slave revolts) as well as the fear of God’s judgment on England, furthering his use of coded language throughout his narrative.

Despite grounding his narrative in his African identity, Equiano further signifies by shifting from a chiefly African persona to a predominantly British one. Although a number of critics attribute his seeming abandonment of African identity as “mental colonization” (Orban 655), it is apparent that Equiano elects to evolve to a British identity, perhaps to speak in favor of the abolition of the slave trade in England. Potkay confirms this elected transition, noting that “[a]ny transformation [Equiano] undergoes is one he wills, guides, and controls [emphasis mine]” (680). In other words, Equiano’s familiarity with the way blacks were viewed, whether they were free or not, perhaps propelled him into assuming a British identity. In order for his message to be heard and accepted, he must make the British audience comfortable with him; to do so, he must become like them. As Orban states, it is imperative that Equiano move away from his solely African identity (622) while arguing for the cause.

Evidence of Equiano’s transition occurs early in his “interesting” narrative. He goes from referring to African slaves, including himself, as “us blacks” in chapter two (57) and using “we” and “our native Africans” in chapter three (62), to referring himself as “almost [italics mine] an Englishman” in chapter four (77). We must realize that at the mention of his “almost” being an Englishman, Equiano was still enslaved. Equiano perhaps feels “almost” English because he was well-treated. At the time of his transition, he had been given two additional biblical names, Jacob and Michael. Adam Potkay argues, “For Jacob, as ‘Israel,’ is the eponymous patriarch who descends into Egypt—the land of wonders that turns into the land of bondage” (683). Potkay
maintains that Equiano spiritually and symbolically moves from his African name, which connects him to his captivity, to European ones. In this way, Equiano “becomes ‘Jacob’; and, later, aboard a ship bound for England--the land in which Equiano finally settles--gains renown as an abolitionist--he is renamed ‘Gustavus Vassa’” (683-84). Yet Gates offers another explanation in his chapter titled “The Trope of the Talking Book.” Although his point in this chapter focuses on Equiano’s verb tense shift within his narrative, Gates’ theory on Equiano’s movement from property to person connects with his naming and identity as an African as well. In a sobering episode for Equiano, Gates opines the following: “When Equiano, the object, attempts to speak to the book, there follows only the deafening silence that obtains between two lifeless objects. Only a subject can speak. . .Through the act of writing alone, Equiano announces and preserves his newly found status as a subject” (156). Therefore the order of his African and European names, along with his nationality, demonstrates his reinvention of self from objectivity to subjectivity.

From this point, we witness Equiano’s seemingly lasting British identity. As a subject, Equiano actively participates in British nautical expeditions, not just as a mere slave whose main duty was, as he states, to distribute gun powder and ammunition (83). He consistently includes himself in the same war efforts in which his captains/masters participate. If his captain/masters are victorious in battle against the French, Equiano alludes to himself as victorious as well. If the English vessel becomes damaged, Equiano owns the ship’s damage as well. Equiano writes, “We took the prizes. . . Our ship being very much damaged. . . [emphasis mine]” (983). Thus, the British victory becomes Equiano’s victory; the British defeat becomes Equiano’s defeat. Wilfred Samuels offers another interpretation of the “we” sentiment. He argues
Equiano’s use of “we” as an attempt for Equiano’s British audience to actively participate in England’s victories over France (68). If we consider this interpretation, we may also see Equiano as trickster figure who, through this participatory and celebratory acts, dupes his audience to pay less attention to or to forget their stereotypical, preconceived notions of Africans.

Thus, in aligning himself with the English, Equiano speaks mounds for the abolitionist cause. Those opposed to the abolition of the slave trade viewed freed blacks as incapable of transitioning into English society. What would freed blacks do? Where would they live? According to Joan Baum, the consensus was that if slaves who had been unaccustomed to freedom were indeed freed, they would be incapable of peacefully coexisting in the same society that had oppressed them (138). Moreover, if slaves were freed, they would be less likely to work as diligently as they had worked when they had been slaves. Walvin records a longstanding tradition to return England’s poor to their homelands (133). Equiano addresses England’s black population issue towards his narrative’s end, as he mentions his own participation (or lack thereof) and ultimate failure in the Sierra Leone mission to send the vast number freed, poor blacks inundating England back to Africa (229).

A surface reading of the narrative may assume that Equiano completely immerses himself into English society as he primarily and publicly uses his European names, Gustavus Vassa, for the majority of his life. Walvin mentions Equiano’s failure to publicly use his African name until the last ten years of his life (31). Coupled with this fact, Equiano also marries an English woman, Susan Cullen. We may further see that Equiano elects to cater all things British because he seeks to forget his African identity. However, his constant references to "the African," "The oppressed Ethiopian," and other cultural identifiers in the letters and writings throughout his
narrative refute this notion. Further refutation of this argument may be seen in the *rediscovery* of his African name, coincidentally at the publication of his personal account that spoke against slavery. Moreover, he signifies on his involvement in Sierra Leone by noting that he was coerced and bribed with a warrant into participating. Despite his initial protest in the matter, he was given no choice but to participate: "WHEREAS you are directed, by our [British government's] warrant [emphasis mine]" (227).

Undoubtedly, Equiano realizes that he is, indeed, African. He does not forget from whence he comes. He assumes this British identity because of his cognizance that he has a mission to fulfill. This mission opposes the slave trade. Arguably, Equiano was aware that blacks were viewed as invisible, so why would anyone listen to what an African had to say? Why would anyone listen to him? Therefore, Equiano adopts a plan: if he must temporarily conform by primarily using Gustavus Vassa for most of his life, so be it. This is what he uses to mediate British society. In the same way that slaves were said to have hidden meanings in their songs, we can see that Equiano’s cunning, secretive diction and signifying support the idea that his text may be used as an early representation of transported culture.

1.2 Harriet Wilson: Rejecting the Cult of True Womanhood in Fiction

In his earlier work titled *Exchanging Our Country Marks* (1998), Gomez stresses the evolution of African American identity and maintenance of culture. He records one historian’s study on the eighteenth-century African in New England and the establishment of its own African-centered community. This “black New England community,” as it is termed, not only serves as an early example of the ever-changing identity for Africans and their descendents living in America, but also highlights the “continuity” of those homeland cultural practices, despite dis-
placement: “The black New England community resonated with its own cuisine, dance, style of
dress, songs, implements of industry, games, funeral rites, and medicinal practices, all based
upon African models” (26). Evidenced in the literature, we may also add a type of language
game that further served as a continuation of culture--that is, signifyin(g).

Signifyin(g) remained relevant throughout nineteenth century African American writ-
ings, particularly when it came with the attempt to collectively identify blacks. The first African-
American woman to publish a novel in the United States, Harriet Wilson, keeps this transported
trend going in her 1859 “autobiographical” novel titled Our Nig. Although some critics superfi-
cially read her novel as sentimental fiction, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., posits that Our Nig mirrors
Wilson’s own life struggles so much that he believes that the novel is autobiographical:

Wilson. . .the protagonist of Our Nig, may have been born to a racially mixed
marriage and may have been compelled . . .to hire herself out as a servant girl
. . .Wilson suffers in an employment situation similar to that of [the protagonist]
. . .Wilson married a black antislavery lecturer. . . as does [the protagonist] in the
novel, and was abandoned by her husband, as [the protagonist] notes in her sto-
ry. (qtd. in Wilson 18-19)

In this novel, Wilson signifies throughout. She disrupts the North’s “positive” notions
associated with the term “free black” and highlights the inconsistencies and contradictions of
indentured servants in the “free” North, thus the subtitle Showing the Slavery’s Shadows Fall
Even There (the North). Similar to her literary predecessors Wheatley and Equiano, Wilson uses
her title to send coded messages of subversion to the working conditions in the North. Like the
institution of slavery in the South, life in the “free” North rendered an almost identical institu-
tion known as indentured servitude. It offered similar, if not the very same, treatment to slavery: mental anguish, hard labor (despite gender), and physical and emotional abuse.

Wilson sets her work in Singleton, Massachusetts, and recounts her own struggles, via her “beautiful mulatto” protagonist Frado, a free black in the North (295). Frado is the child of a white, “promiscuous,” thus socially outcast, mother named Mag, and a “kind-hearted African American” named Jim (291). Both parents are socially doomed--Mag for her sexual history and Jim for his dark skin. Mag’s initial promiscuity with a white man sullies her traditionally assigned white, i.e., “good” or “pure” nature. As result of her indiscretions, the white community shuns her. Wilson writes, “[Mag] was now expelled from companionship with white people” (295)--so much that her only option for financial support and security is to marry a black man, who by society’s standards is her subordinate. Within this setting of Northern attitudes of racial superiority and gender biasness, Wilson channels her ancestors and writes her narrative to resist convention. Wilson uses Frado as her vehicle to expose the contradictions found within societal expectations for women of color. The idea that black women, who were susceptible to treatment unbefitting for white women but were to be held by the same standards proved problematic for Wilson. Against this backdrop, Wilson signifies on the prevailing notions of womanhood and Western religion.

Wilson presents Frado as a maverick of sorts. Subverting the same religious doctrines that slave owners used to convert their property in an attempt to control their minds, thus their bodies, Wilson uses Frado’s actions to mirror her own intentions. In the novel, Frado resists Mrs. Bellmont’s abuse with her words as she sheds light on her ill treatment from supposed benevolent Christians. Despite Frado’s lowly status as a servant, she manages to rebel not only
against Mrs. Bellmont—“‘Stop!’ shouted Frado, ‘strike me again, and I’ll never work a mite for
you’” (334)—she also contests the very first virtue of the cult of domesticity, piety. Since piety
comes first on the list of an ideal nineteenth-century woman, Frado’s failure to fully embrace
Christianity exemplifies her rejection to the cult of domesticity. One reason for this partial re-
fusal, as Elizabeth J. West posits, is race. Frado’s race affects her ability to fully accept Christian-
ity God. West states, “Frado’s religious faith is never confirmed [emphasis mine]” (10).

As a child, Frado wrestles with the notion of giving her life to a Christian God. She ra-
tionalizes that since she is mistreated by the white (“superior”/ “pure”/ “moral”) females in the
white (“sinless”/ “angelic”/ “clean”) house, this maltreatment results from her being black
(“sullied”/ “inferior”/ “defiled”). Even in Bible study meetings where, according to Aunt Abby,
“she seems much affected by what she hears” (Wilson 327), Frado is constantly reminded of
the perceived superiority of whites. Mrs. Bellmont confirms whites’ superiority complex con-
cerning religion, as she catches Frado openly reading the Bible, “just as though she expected to
turn pious nigger and preach to white folks [emphasis mine]” (335). Clearly, the issue is not
necessarily that Frado desires to establish some type of relationship with God; the problem is
that the appearance of a pious Frado would threaten Mrs. Bellmont’s highly regarded white
woman position. Wilson signifies by juxtaposing Mrs. Bellmont’s whiteness to Frado’s black-
ness. In “preaching to white folks,” Mrs. Bellmont realizes that Frado, a black woman, would be
in a higher position than white people. In other words, “preaching” connotes talking “down” to
another or giving moral advice. Therefore, Mrs. Bellmont sees a need to keep blacks like Frado
in their place.
Evidence of Frado’s conflict with religion occurs in a conversation with James, the benevolent son of Mrs. Bellmont. Frado inquires about God:

‘Oh, I wish I had my mother back; then I should not be kicked and whipped so.

Who made me so [black]?’

‘God,’ answered James.

‘Did God make you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who made Aunt Abby?’

‘God.’

‘Who made your mother?’

‘God.’

‘Did the same God that made her make me?’ [emphasis mine]

‘Yes.’

‘Well, then, I don’t like him.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because he made her white, and me black. Why didn’t he make us both white?’

(314)

With this dialogue, Wilson demonstrates Frado’s inability to fully commit to Christianity.

Frado rationalizes that she does not want to go to heaven because there is a chance Mrs. Bellmont may be there. Even if Frado were to accept God and have a chance at heaven, she would still be considered inferior because whites, such as Mrs. Bellmont, may oppress her even there: “If she should get to heaven at all, she would never be as high up. . .” (341).
To add insult to injury, Frado’s isolation as a free black in the North further complicates her inability to accept Christianity. According to West, there was no community of Christian women similar to Frado (“Reworking the Conversion Narrative” 15). Therefore, what good would Christianity do her if it would not improve her position? Clearly, Frado cannot relate to a God who only seems to allow whites to benefit from serving Him. Hence, to establish her own identity, Frado merely exudes a “Christian exterior” (Wilson 355). In Frado’s refusal of Westernized religion, Wilson draws attention to and signifies upon the contradictions and inequalities whites used to justify their treatment of blacks. Further, Frado redefines her own identity in refusing to accept Christianity wholeheartedly. Mbiti offers an additional explanation for African-derived individual’s inability to fully commit to a foreign belief. It is because they transport their own beliefs with them. He states,

. . . when African migrate in large numbers from one part of the continent to another, or from Africa to other continents, they take religion with them. They can only know how to live within their religious context. Even if they are converted to another religion, like Christianity or Islam, they do not completely abandon their traditional religion immediately: it remains with them for several generations and sometimes centuries. . . In spite of being suppressed, brainwashed and bombarded with another (and foreign) culture since the days of slavery which lasted until the nineteenth century they have retained many elements of their African religiosity to this day [emphasis mine]. (14-15)

In rejecting Christianity, Frado challenges what Welter calls the “core of a woman’s virtue” (152). Basically, Frado reinvents herself because she rejects the Westernized concepts of piety
and reshapes her belief in God to fit with what she, a black woman, identifies. Wilson writes, “Frado . . . became a believer in future existence—one of happiness or misery. Her doubt was, is there a heaven for the black? She knew there was one for . . . all the good white people. She had listened attentively to all the minister had said, and all Aunt Abby had told her; but then it was all for white people” (333). Thus, Frado’s resistance of the societal expectations for free blacks demonstrates Wilson’s signifyin(g) on these ideals.

Not only does Frado snub nineteenth-century notions of white, female gentility, but Wilson does as well. Wilson fails to follow the sentimental and domestic novels that inundated nineteenth-century fiction, which foretold of pious, white women who revered and embraced religion. As West notes, Wilson’s race made it “unlikely” to do so (West, “Reworking the Conversion Narrative” 24). Therefore, it is imperative to recognize the significance of Wilson’s recreation of self. In her very first novel, Wilson creates “her own literary form [emphasis mine]” (24). Beth Maclay Doriani confirms West’s notion of a new form, contending that Wilson’s novel “changes the rules of the literary game by writing [. . .] a fictionalized account of her life—instead of the traditional autobiographical genre of her race, the slave narrative” (207). With her creation, Wilson also defies the first virtue of the cult of true womanhood. As a result of this literary resistance, Wilson improves a previous form by creating a work in which black women during the nineteenth century could identify, re-inventing ideals of black womanhood. She does so by using coded language to signify on the dominant impressions of white womanhood that do not apply to black female sensibilities and their ingrained belief systems.
1.3 Elizabeth Keckley: Politicking and Subverting the Cult in Narrative Form

Nineteenth-century writer, Elizabeth Keckley subverts the ideals associated with black womanhood in her 1868 publication titled *Behind the Scenes. Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. Born of a slave mother and father in Dinwiddie, Virginia, Keckley archives the cruelties of the “peculiar institution” which divides families. She writes, “I did not know much of my father, for he was the slave of another man . . . he was separated from us, and only allowed to visit my mother twice a year” (22). In this work, Keckley chronicles the abuse of a female slave by white slave owners, and later highlights her role as the right-hand woman to the First Lady of the United States, Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln. Unlike Wilson, Keckley does not opt to chronicle her trials and tribulations as a fictional autobiography; instead, she chooses a more personal, historic approach, indicating, “I . . . have hastily sketched some of the striking incidents that go to make up my history . . . everything I have written is strictly true . . . nothing has been exaggerated” (ix).

In the spirit of signifyin(g), the title suggests that the novel’s subject is Keckley; yet, it focuses on Mary Todd Lincoln. Keckley boldly journeys into the political realm as she subtitles her narrative *And Four Years in the White House*, linking herself to the President of the United States. This subtitle serves as an attempt to re-invent her former thirty-year status as a slave. Keckley juxtaposes the lowest social position (during the nineteenth century) to that of the highest political position in the United States. Equally as noticeable and ingenious is Keckley’s word play on the number four. Not only does it connect to the age at which she recollects her first memories of the “responsibilities” forced upon a child in slavery—“To take care of this baby was my first duty. . . True, I was but a child myself-only four years old” (19)—it also refers to
the number of years which she was sexually assaulted (39). The number four also signals the amount of time a United States president serves a full term—four years. All of these numeric references reflect the sociopolitical undertone of Keckley’s literary work. More convincingly, however, is the extension of the reinvention, which Keckley constructs around the number four. Although impossible to determine if Keckley had these particular attributes in her innermost thoughts, these connections to the number four clearly align themselves with the four virtues of the cult of true womanhood—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.

As does Wilson with indentured servitude, Keckley clarifies the contrary notions concerning the hardships of slave life, especially those concerning black females. She elucidates the harsh reality of slave life for females. Keckley writes, “I was regarded as fair looking for one of my race, and for four years a white man. . . had base designs upon me. . . suffice it to say that he persecuted me for four years, and I—I became a mother [emphasis mine]” (39). In this way, Keckley has no choice but to inadvertently defy the cult of true womanhood’s second tenet of purity. Her status as a slave permits her exclusion, as abolitionists argued, from this ideal. Foster notes that “slave women were subject to sexual abuse far beyond that of other groups of nineteenth-century women” (66). Because of her race, Keckley recognizes her faultlessness in this violation of one of the standards of true womanhood. She places the blame must fall on “that society which deem[s] it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in [her] then position” (39). Therefore, Keckley uses her status as a slave (as the basis) to re-adjust the ideals of the cult of domesticity to fit her, as well as many other black women’s, complex situations. Julia Stern echoes Keckley’s assertion, indicating that black women’s places in nineteenth-century society were “complicated.” Stern argues the standards by which white women were judged
did not apply to female slaves, for they were “ever vulnerable to white male sexual exploitation . . . [and] the cult conflicts directly with its primary emphasis on chastity” (444). Moreover, society deemed the ideals of the cult of true womanhood applicable only to white women. Laurie Kaiser states, “Of course this view of the ideal woman, promoted by whites, did not extend to black women [emphasis mine]” (97-98).

The fact that Keckley catapults herself into a position in which whites were dependent on her further complicates her violation of female gentility and highlights her double talk. As a slave, Keckley is “allowed” to support her “family” (Mr. Garland’s family, as well as her mother) with her occupation as a seamstress. As she indicates, Mr. Garland gives her “permission” to work (45). In fact, not only does she financially support others, she has the audacity to be selective. Keckley writes, “The best ladies in St. Louis were my patrons, and when my reputation was once established I never lacked for orders [emphasis mine]” (45). Keckley does not sew for just anyone, and, undoubtedly, she must have been talented enough to feed and to support “seventeen persons for two years and five months” (45). Here, Keckley simultaneously performs two functions: she is a working slave, i.e., she gets money for her labor, and she not only supports her master’s family, but her own as well. Keckley’s “occupation” places her in a superior position to that of whites, for they come to depend on her to sustain them. In this reversal of labor roles, Keckley re-creates an identity of a female slave with some glimpse of freedom. Ironically, her position as a slave contributes to her self-reliance, for it teaches her not to depend on anyone but herself (19). This self-reliance helps to mold Keckley’s interpretation of herself (identity).
Michael Berthold recognizes Keckley’s goal to create her own identity, thus staking a claim at owning a part of herself. He states, “Keckley manages to comment on her own unfolding writing project, indicating the possession of some ‘self’ even while in slavery prior to her narrative” (109). Julie Cary Nerad offers a reading similar to that of Berthold, stating, “For African Americans, gaining and retaining ownership of one’s self was of primary importance not only for its implicit psychological value, but also because it made possible the transformation within U.S. socio-cultural and legal systems from an object position (as human chattel) to a subject position (as thinking person). . .” (358). Thus for Keckley, establishing a perception of self independent of her slave status echoes her resistance.

Perhaps the ultimate illustration of disturbance occurs as Keckley disrupts nineteenth-century notions of womanhood. She reveals the unconventional actions of a supposed “gentle” white woman. However, Keckley does not name just any arbitrary white woman; she mediates the most powerful house in the land and exposes the wife of one of the most respected and beloved U.S. presidents, Abraham Lincoln. According to the narrative’s preface, Keckley’s intentions in publishing Behind the Scenes were to defend the unfavorable public statements surrounding Mary Todd Lincoln’s excessive lifestyle. Carolyn Sorisio states, “Mary Todd Lincoln was considered by many to be extravagant and improper in her dress, manners, and actions” (20). Keckley’s text permanently and publicly criticizes Mrs. Lincoln for “forc[ing] herself into notoriety” (xiii). In other words, Keckley (a black woman) blames Mrs. Lincoln (a politically elevated white woman) for her own indiscretions. According to the public’s rejection of Keckley’s narrative, this “defense” proved problematic. The public had already deemed Mrs. Lincoln in violation of the code of ethics, i.e., the cult of true womanhood. Yet, for someone who is con-
considered Mary Todd Lincoln’s subordinate—not just a “waiting woman,” but also as a black female—to openly ridicule her is what Karen Halttunen refers to as the unveiling of the “genteel performer” (qtd. in Sorisio 20). Mrs. Lincoln’s reputation as a suspect in the “crime” of violating the cult of domesticity is threatened because Keckley, a black woman, verifies public suspicion. Keckley’s narrative, thus, contests the principles of the cult of true womanhood as she publicly reveals Mrs. Lincoln’s “genteel” flaws, as “proper” woman. Sorisio writes,

... Keckley’s memoir jeopardizes the *increasingly delicate* self-construction of the white American middle class ... calls their ‘genteel performance.’ ... it [the narrative] revealed ... a deep-rooted fear of many middle-class Americans that any ‘vulgar boor’ could suddenly ‘rip the *fragile* mask of the manner from the genteel performer and expose the would-be social climber in all his or her own underlying vulgarity [emphasis mine]. (Halttunen, qtd. in Sorisio 20)

In other words, it was harmful enough for Mrs. Lincoln to be discovered as a genteel charlatan, but to be revealed by a “vulgar boor”, i.e., a black woman, proved more detrimental for Keckley. Keckley’s observations and publication of the “elite,” “genteel” Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln’s “faults” may lead to other blacks performing the same action (20). Increasingly significant is the general belief that white women depended on black women to elevate and validate their principles of womanhood. Simply put, the secret to white gentility rested in its juxtaposition to blacks’ subordination; that is, whites appeared more genteel if they were compared to blacks who were considered irrelevant to the cult of true womanhood. However, Sorisio posits that Keckley agitates these ideals as she “splinter[s] the *fragile* veneer middle-class culture in mid-nineteenth-century America, revealing and challenging the racial, gendered, and class ideolo-
gies that were inextricably tied to the middle class’s increasingly precarious social status” (20). Keckley’s supposed inadvertent criticism of Mary Todd Lincoln proves that there is nothing “true” about Lincoln’s womanhood. Keckley’s public observations of Mary Todd Lincoln’s flaws essentially situate Keckley as a trickster. Under the guise defending Mary Todd Lincoln’s actions, Keckley simultaneously reduces her to commoner and fallen first lady.

Both Harriet Wilson and Elizabeth Keckley signify as a means to subvert the so-called collective identities of black women. These two women—one who is credited as the progenitor of the African-American female narrative, and the other as perhaps the National Inquirer of her day—defied convention, manipulated the system, and created their own interpretations of black womanhood via their literary works. Despite the criticism they received and their works being considered financial failures, Wilson and Keckley proved that success is not measured by book sales. Success lies in the reality that they created and re-created venues in which women of color could express, envision, and re-envision their own notions of black womanhood by illustrating the social inequalities in which the cult of true womanhood were constructed. To achieve this goal so surreptitiously was just an added bonus. The ultimate point was to identify their individual struggles. Indeed, it was important for Wilson to identify her own struggles, as it was equally important for Keckley. At the very least, African Americans received something they may have needed from these women’s hard work.

In Wilson and Keckley challenging the prevailing paradigms of the cult of true womanhood via their manipulation of the language, they recognized something in themselves with which they did not, or could not, associate. This inability to relate signaled that there was a glitch in the model. As a result, these visionary women sought to improve it, adjust it, change
it, rearrange it, and revise it, all to make it more appropriate for them. By resisting conventions of white womanhood, they established identities not only for themselves, but for other women of color as well. Thus despite their oppressed positions as black women, Wilson and Keckley eventually came to own a part of themselves. They took the old, unrelated societal expectations and ushered in the newer, more befitting ones particular to their livelihoods.
2  SECRECY AND IDENTITY IN JAMES WELDON JOHNSON’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN EX-COLORED MAN AND NELLA LARSEN’S PASSING

“We wear the mask that grins and lies/It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes...We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries/To thee from tortured souls arise” (Dunbar 1-2; 10-11). These lines from Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask” (1895) perhaps say it best regarding the mien of African-derived peoples. The mask that grins and lies in this chapter’s instance, however, is race passing. This chapter focuses on James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912) and Nella Larsen’s Passing (1929), two texts fitting for a critique of secrecy as it relates to passing. These texts center on the protagonists’ racial ambiguity and offer gender-specific treatment of this issue in the early-to-mid-twentieth century. Each character navigates throughout a society that privileges whiteness and lightness. Johnson and Larsen demonstrate disparities based on the gender of those who pass and note the disparities in the manner in which the protagonists navigate thought a white, male-dominated society. Because men and women were assigned certain societal expectations based on their sex roles, their societal success may be dependent on their actions. For instance, men were expected to provide financially for their families based on the mere biology of their maleness. Women, on the other hand, were expected to remain in the home, bear children, and care for their children for similar biological reasons. As Lynn Weber notes, “Even in the area of reproduction and mothering, the biological relationships of women to children are socially constructed and given meaning in race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies” (103). Thus, we can see how societal expectations inform a person’s actions.
Race was another construct that further complicated these social expectations. Because of discriminative practices, some black men and women were not in a position live up to these conventions. Black women fared even worse. At the turn of the century, black men were still battling the stereotypes from slavery’s legacies. Sharecropping and other forms of manual labor were the available options for many people of color. Many black women were catapulted into the work force, unlike those white women who, because of their race, were not expected to. Weber states the significance of social constructs but at the same time recognizes that the lines between them may be unclear. She notes, “Race, class, and gender shape everyone’s life every day. Yet these systems are often hard to see, to understand, even to define. In U.S. society, these constructs are typically defined by referring to social groups selected for unequal treatment . . .” (27). Although race and gender considered social constructs, their interworking depends on the way Johnson’s and Larsen’s main characters function, as each questions his or her identity as a male or female who possesses the appearance of whiteness.

Historically, racial passing, or what Larsen calls “passing over,” is rooted in appearances, more specifically the appearance of the hegemony. Based on skin shade and color, a person could pass over into the dominant culture’s world of accesses. In the United States, this practice was most popular after the Civil War and during Reconstruction, but continued well into the twentieth century (Ervin 96). The 1896 historic case of Plessy v. Ferguson challenged the American ideals of racial preferences based on physical appearances. Muddied by what was considered black, the exterior presence of the passing individual belied the social and “biological” constructs of race, and the reality of the one drop of black blood rule made it even more difficult to distinguish who actually could reap the benefits of whiteness. Kathleen Pfeiffer notes
that Homer Plessy’s lawyer, Albion Tourgée, argued that defining race in the United States was, indeed a problem. Pfeiffer states, “By identifying the ‘appearance of whiteness’ as valuable property, Tourgée challenged the assumption that racial identity could be visually or objectively determined” (9). With this uncertainty, a direct result and reminder of copulation between races, the biology of dominant and recessive genes produced and reproduced individuals who appeared white, having traditionally white racial markers, thus the makings of privilege. These individuals possessed the ability to subvert the notions of blackness, as well as infiltrate the world of whiteness.

Johnson’s and Larsen’s texts reveal secrecy’s core involvement in passing. Although seemingly obvious, secrecy in race passing incorporates elements that may be found in traits that link directly to those homeland practices transported via the Middle Passage. To subvert the politics of race and to antagonize the constructs of race in the United States, these characters masked their identities with the same spoken and unspoken laws that related to their appearances. Therefore, to successfully conceal one’s racial identity, the discourse about said identity must be withheld from the society that may disallow access to the privileges that accompanies the appearance of whiteness. The main characters’ successful navigation throughout white society, and black society for that matter, depends upon this silence, for if discovered, their individual passing realities would be jeopardized.

To pass, each character incorporates trickery and deceitful tactics, ultimately duping society, even if only temporary. These tricks, which link to secrecy, may be viewed as cultural transports, adapted to suit the nature of the trickster’s need to dupe. In each novel, the protagonist flirts with the idea and reality of passing and eventually decides to do so, whether only
on occasion or for the long term. When their individual realities and lifestyles are threatened, these characters’ secret identities present life-changing effects—either they decide to pass over completely (as is the case for Johnson’s ex-colored man) or they consider returning or attempting to return to the side they once abandoned (as is the case for Larsen’s Clare). Evidenced in the texts is the manner in which the ex-colored man and Larsen’s Irene and Clare pass. Passing over differs drastically for the sexes; males who pass over tend to do so alone, whereas females tend to vacillate and navigate in pairs. Some even attempt to return to the community that they leave. Perhaps this disparity relates to the socialization of men and women, given the conventions of manhood and womanhood. Houston A. Baker echoes the societal expectations of black men and women in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984). He notes the “individual wage earning” mindset that freed black men such as Frederick Douglass were expected to attain (49), as well as the “collective, rather than individualistic” thought pattern that women such as Harriet Jacobs opted for (55). The emphasis here is on the individual versus the collective, and the ex-colored man represents the individual, and Irene and Clare reflect the collective. Overall, both texts link passing to secrecy as an ancestral transport, maintained within the African American community. More directly, this transport plays out via trickery, the desire for access, and the need to protect.

### 2.1 James Weldon Johnson: Male Navigation and Secret Identity

Although initially published anonymously, James Weldon Johnson’s novel ushers in a first in African American literature. Eugene Levy notes, “Johnson was the first black writer to use first person narrative in fiction” (qtd. in Stepto, 103). This first cannot be recognized without Johnson’s indebtedness to his literary predecessors Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois,
and Frederick Douglass to name a few. The significance of Johnson’s work and its connection to
these men reminds us that in order to create something new, we must first know what preceded it and that is what Johnson does. His text “revoices,” as Robert Stepto states, the tradition that the aforementioned black male writers established: “The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man identifies and collects from antedating texts—notably Up from Slavery and The Souls of Black Folk, but also the slave narratives—those key tropes which form the Afro-American literary tradition” (96). Central to these key tropes, though, are the cultural silences that resonate within African American texts, no matter the genre. Thus, Johnson’s connections and revoices echo the themes and issues found within the texts to which he is indebted, including secrecy as a key trope.

In The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, Johnson chronicles the life of a racially ambiguous unnamed male narrator. Set in a small Georgia town at the turn of the century, the novel presents the narrator’s recollections of his parentage and earliest memories, which shape him and inform his decisions. However, the novel is not to be misread as merely a text about passing. From the onset, Johnson clearly informs the reader that secrecy grounds his text. Indeed, the novel deals with a man who chooses to pass for white, yet the narrator’s opening revelation serves as the foundation for a close reading of this text based on secrecy as a trope in African American literature: “I know that in writing the following pages I am divulging the great secret of my life, the secret which for some years I have guarded far more carefully than any of my earthly possessions” (393). And the legacy of secrecy does not begin with the narrator himself. In fact, his parents are keepers of secrets that determine his future. Clearly, beginning the narrative by informing the reader that a secret exists sets the stage for the secret to be
revealed. As Leslie Lewis notes, for a secret to be considered a secret, it has to be told. She states, “Secrets involve a triad: one person who keeps something from someone, but at the same time tells that something to someone else” (3). And that is what Johnson’s narrator does.

Along with the great secret the narrator keeps, this text also demonstrates the trickery involved in keeping secrets that pertain to masking one’s identity. Revealing his trick or his joke leads the reader to prepare for what ultimately becomes his social commentary on the arbitrariness of societal constructions of race. The narrator treats and deals with his secret identity as a “practical joke on society” (Johnson 393), which seems to be one way for a number of writers of the earlier twentieth century’s fictional texts to treat the subject of racial ambiguity. This may be a direct result of the politics of racial preferences. For black men who were emasculated merely because of their skin color and class, masculinity was defined in white terms. In Black Skin, White Masks (1967), Franz Fanon states that

. . . the black man is not a man. There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born. In most cases, the black man lacks the advantage of being able to accomplish this . . . The white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness [emphasis mine]. (8-9)

Thus, race and gender shape the ex-colored man in how chooses to cope with his ultimate decision to pass for white. In other words, his coping mechanism seems to be to make light of the seriousness of the decision.

A similar feigned lightheartedness may be seen with the male characters in George Schuyler’s male characters in Black No More (1931), a satirical novel that examines race from a
scientific perspective. Like Johnson and Schuyler, many male writers’ novels spoke to the societal ills that used race as a means of discrimination and mistreatment. From these dialogues came texts that used race passing (deceit/deception) as a vehicle to address the hypocrisy and arbitrariness of racial constructs, even in the form of coded language within their writings. Lewis notes, “. . .we might say that the textual keeping and telling of secrets is a way for African American authors to mark the existence of (and respond to) societal, racially inflected structures that guarantee unreliable readers who will have difficulty hearing what they are being told” (4). Schuyler’s text takes on race as a social construct, examining what would occur if there was a scientific formula that could change black folks to white folks in three days. Like Johnson’s narrator, Schuyler’s Max is a trickster who, because of a history of discrimination in Atlanta and New York and propelled by a white woman’s rejection, decides that he will go to Dr. Crookman’s sanitarium to get white: “No more jim crow [sic]. No more insults. As a white man he could go anywhere, be anything he wanted to be, do most anything he wanted to do, be a free man at last. . .and probably be able to meet the girl from Atlanta. What a vision!” (10).

For reasons similar to Johnson’s narrator, Max chooses to pass for economic gain and social access and acceptance. Also evident is Dr. Crookman’s role in the deception, for it is he who directs the followers on the secrets to getting white. However, in revoicing Johnson’s ex-colored man, Dr. Crookman notes that he cannot “divulge the secret. . .” to the media (11).

This deception that resonates throughout, this trickery that manifests in these characters may be, according to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., traced back to those “retained elements” that the Africans brought with him via the Middle Passage (4). Gates states that “this trickster topos not only seems to have survived the bumpy passage to the New World, but it appears even to-
day in Nigeria, Benin, Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, and the United States. . .[This and other traditions] the black enslaved brought with them from Africa, and maintained through the mnemonic devices peculiar to oral literature, continued to function both as meaningful units of . . . and as traces of their origins [emphasis mine]” (4-5). Because the trickster topos varies in name, depending on location, Gates decides to call it Esu, or Esu-Elegbara as a collective term (6). The figures within function as mediators, their mediations serving the purpose of deceiving, duping, or tricking (6). Within his explanation, Gates notes that the trickster possesses various qualities, all of which may reveal themselves at any given time. In African American culture, however, the trickster figure that derives from Esu is the Signifying Monkey. Similar to Esu, the Signifying Monkey incorporates many of the same deceptive tactics. Within Johnson’s text, the reader may recognize the ex-colored man as a trickster figure, the monkey. He lies and mediates society’s expectations and the land’s law by inserting himself, racially ambiguous and all, into a position which biologically, he is not historically or politically allowed. By passing, he critiques society and signifies upon its members.

Moreover, access to the entitlements associated with whiteness prompted males who possessed passing capabilities to do so. For instance, the unnamed narrator in Johnson’s text ultimately chooses to pass for economic gain. As a black man who appears white, he cannot envision living as a lowly, subservient individual. He has witnessed what the world has to offer to a black man and he feels that he can better live as a white man: “I had made up my mind that since I was not going to be a Negro, I would avail myself of every possible opportunity to make a white man’s success, and that if it can be summed up in any one word, means” (500). To obtain these “means,” however, the ex-colored man must do so by himself and in secrecy. If
he wants to prosper in a society that limits him based on his racial makeup, the ex-colored man must hide his racial identity in favor of access. As a man, his identity is tied to his maleness, and as a male, society expects him to possess the financial wherewithal to attract, establish, and maintain a family.

For the most part, male characters that pass tend to do so alone, perhaps because of staunch individualism or self reliance. In *African Spirituality in Black Women’s Fiction* (2011), Elizabeth J. West states, “Many blacks have bought into America’s dominant rhetoric of individualism, especially as a philosophy of economic prosperity” (16). From an Anglo centric ethos, society teaches masculinity as generally something lone and dominant. For black men in a Westernized setting, though, that construct of maleness also associates with or attaches to whiteness. Fanon posits that the black man must align his thinking to that of the white man if he is to be considered his equal. He states,

*We understand now why the black man cannot take pleasure in his insularity. For him there is only one way out, and it leads to the white world. Whence his constant preoccupation with attracting the attention of the white man, his concern with being powerful like the white man, his determined effort to acquire protective qualities. . .it is from within that the Negro will seek admittance to the white sanctuary. (51)*

This aligned insularity best speaks to the idea of the lone black man’s passing.

Despite the access an assumed white identity grants, there are instances within the text that the narrator feels compelled to reveal himself as black, especially when whites make uncomplimentary comments about blacks in his presence. The narrator states, “. . . and more than
once I felt like disclaiming: ‘I am a coloured [sic] man. Do I not disprove the theory that one drop of Negro blood renders a man unfit?’” (502). In desiring to disprove whites’ theory of innate black inferiority, the ex-colored man seeks validation and recognition in the space of those who believed blacks worthy of ridicule. As Fanon theorizes, “There is fact: White men consider themselves superior to black men. There is another fact: Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect” (10). Yet, the ex-colored man remains silent for obvious reason, failing to reveal his true identity in the face of those who ridicule his race, despite his clean image as a musician. The ex-colored man desires acceptance, but the certainty of the black experience perhaps will not allow him to reveal or to revert (48). Instead, he subverts what society deems his role based solely on his racial background and copes with his decision to pass by reveling in the fact that he dupes society by keeping his identity as a colored man a secret.

The impulse to protect is central in Johnson’s novel as well. This aspect is evident in the novel’s opening and towards the end. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator recollects seemingly vague information about the town in which he was born. He states, “I shall not mention the name of the town, because there are people still living there who could be connected with this narrative. I have only a faint recollection of the place of my birth” (393). On the surface, this omission may be interpreted as an echo of the slave narrative tradition, where a narrator such as a Frederick Douglass, may provide only approximates and distant memories—“I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsboro about twelve miles from Easton in Talbot County, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age [emphasis mine]. . .” (923). Surely, it is plausible that Douglass cannot recall his age, for the chattel slave experience provided unfathomable
human restrictions, stripping a slave’s very personhood to the core. Douglass’ narrative records the physical and emotional disconnect from his mother, among many things. The lack of basic human needs, such adequate food, clothing, and shelter, were also noted. Yet, Douglass’ narrative also shows the cultural silences that are connected to both the American slave experience and to the ancestral transport. One clear instance serves to protect what may be considered Douglass’s extended family. Within the narrative, Douglass recalls his experience with the little Baltimore boys and how they assisted him with his literacy lessons. Even in sharing this experience, Douglass refuses to name them. He writes, “I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids;—not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country” (940). This example not only demonstrates Douglass’ attempt to shield those youths who were instrumental in his literacy, it highlights the hypocrisy of so-called Christians who upheld slavery. Similar to Douglass’ example, the ex-colored man uses protective, coded language to guard his family, as well as himself, from any association with his colored past.

Additionally, Johnson makes use of the secret trope, specifically the narrator’s mother’s protective silences regarding his race. Although he initially fails to recognize himself in his colored mother, his desire to know more about his father is thwarted as his mother seeks to hide the truth from him. The narrator’s mother states, “‘No I am not white, but you—your father is one of the greatest men in the country—the best blood of the South is in you’. . . ‘I’ll tell you about him some day.’ I sobbed: ‘I want to know now.’ She answered: ‘No, not now’” (402). Prior to his inquiry of his identity, though, the ex-colored man had not viewed himself as colored. It is
not until he is cast against a white background within his integrated class at school that he realizes that not only is he “Othered,” he is colored:

. . . the principal came into our room, and after talking to the teacher, for some reason said: ‘I wish all of the white scholars to stand for a moment.’ I rose with the others. The teacher looked at me, and calling my name, said: ‘You sit down for the present, and rise with the others.’ . . . I sat down dazed. I saw nothing and heard nothing. . . . When school was dismissed, I went out in a kind of stupor. A few of the white boys jeered me, saying: ‘Oh, you’re a nigger too.’ I heard some black children say: ‘We knew he was coloured.’ (400-401)

The tragedy for the narrator is that he had not been told that he is colored; this information had been kept from him, perhaps to protect him. As Boyd-Franklin notes, keeping secrets may be related to protection, among other things (322). Although his mother’s silence may have served as a protective mechanism for her young, impressionable child, it is also valuable to examine her silence as an example of the transference of those cultural signifiers that have been maintained. As an ancestral custom, the narrator’s mother may be practicing the African-derived tradition of silence. Since Gomez affirms that secrets were one of those maintained practices (Exchanging Our County Marks 6), this claim should not be difficult to fathom. From an Afrocentric perspective, the most appropriate way to reconcile the child’s inquiries concerning his identity is to shush him with a coded version of the master/slave relationship. The narrator’s mother resists a direct answer about his father’s race, or until he is old enough to figure it out on his own.
In this way, this mother’s evasiveness echoes the silences female slaves were expected to maintain in their relations, consensual or not, with white men. However, it may be read as circumlocution, speaking around the subject as we have seen in ancient West African epics such as *Sundial*ta. It could also be Johnson signifyin(g) on the complicated heritage of the South—white men fathering illegitimate black children. If we consider what O.R. Dathorne asserts regarding our looking to the African past as a way to understand African American literature culture (63), then the mother’s silence may be a result this language manipulation. Thus, the mother’s revision of the truth may be an attempt shield the ex-colored man from the harsh realities and the complicated traditions of slavery’s legacy throughout the diaspora.

Ultimately, Johnson’s text demonstrates the link between passing, secrecy, and deceit. Deceit involves secrecy and vice versa. The narrator’s identity is built on a history of secrets and the manner in which he moves throughout society relies heavily on this foundation. To succeed, however, he must trick (deceive) others into believing that he is who he *appears* to be. This duping of society leads him to the access that he seeks in order to be considered a man, particularly a white man. Ultimately, it is the access that he must protect and maintain if he is to continue to deceive. Clearly, the notion of passing is cyclical for the ex-colored man. By the novel’s end, he is widowed, miserable and average, longing to have made a difference in the race as “great” colored men has done. He’s “an ordinary white man who has made little money. They are men who are making history and a race. I too might have taken part in a work so glorious” (511). Thus, is his regret. Yet, despite his misery, the ex-colored man reconciles his mundane life with an emphasis on his children, who possess the privilege of passing as well. They are not and, as the novel suggests, will not be aware of his heritage: —“[B]ut there is *nothing* I
would not suffer to keep the brand [being black] from being placed upon them” [emphasis mine] (509). For Johnson’s narrator, that “nothing” includes keeping their identities a secret from society.

2.2  **Nella Larsen: Passing and Female Navigation**

With the success of *Passing* (1929) and her first novel *Quicksand* (1928), Nella Larsen established herself as a literary legend, becoming the first black woman to receive a Guggenheim in creative writing (McDowell ix). Within her novels, Larsen explores not only race issues, but also those conflicts such as the trials of womanhood and motherhood. The daughter of a white mother and a black father, Larsen highlights the psychology behind blacks’ motivations to not only obtain, but maintain status for themselves. Julie Cary Nerad offers some insight: “For African Americans, gaining and retaining ownership of one’s self was of primary importance not only for its implicit psychological value, but also because it made possible the transformation within U.S. socio-cultural and legal systems from an object position (as human chattel) to a subject position (as thinking person). . .” (358). Within these novels, Larsen also highlights the “values” that the black middle-class celebrates and flaunts, as well as the emptiness that results from attempting to obtain and maintain.

Despite her initial literary success, Larsen was unable to gain further popularity as a writer during the Harlem Renaissance because she was falsely accused of plagiarizing a short story titled “Sanctuary” (1930). This story was coincidentally similar to another short story published by Sheila K. Smith eight years prior in *Century* magazine (McDowell x). Although Larsen was exonerated from any wrong doing, the damage had been done. After this scandal, no one would publish her writings. Yet even with the lack of longevity in the literary sphere, Larsen’s
success is unprecedented, especially among women writers. She ushers in a psychological
treatment of one of the United States’ most pressing and unclear issues—the construct of race.
In this way, she revoices Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*
(1859), the progenitor of the African American novel whose mixed race protagonist, Frado, mirrors Wilson’s own life. Larsen’s characters reflect Wilson’s Frado in that Frado simply performs Christianity or acts as a Christian. In this clandestine way, she “passes” as a Christian in a similar
manner that Larsen’s characters pass as white.

Historically, *Passing* is set against the separate but equal dialogue of the early 1920s. Although the North, more specifically Chicago and Harlem, proved “better” as far as race-relationships were concerned, its conditions demonstrated the disparity between blacks and whites and between who, based on appearances, could and would benefit from belonging to the dom-inant class. As a result of the laws enforcing separate but equal treatment and access, coupled with the legacy and stigma of slavery, a number of people who possessed black blood but looked white used their appearance to transport themselves to white society. Larsen’s passing characters illustrate that not only do those passing depend on secrecy, but secrecy influences the duping, accessing, and protecting throughout.

To understand the specifics of secrecy and its connection to the transport, we must first examine the two female protagonists in Larsen’s text. Both Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry flirt with their masked identities as they pass for white—Irene on occasion for impromptu conveniences and Clare full-time except when she re-enters the world of black elite society. Larsen highlights the surface difference between Clare and Irene’s passing. Similar to Johnson’s ex-colored man who early on submits to the dominant construct of racial identity, Irene identifies
as black. Clare, on the other hand, passes completely over into white society. With Irene’s more stable and traditional background, having both parents actively participating in her life during her formative years, Irene seeks to maintain her black middle class lifestyle, marrying Brian, a successful Harlem doctor. Therefore, she has no true reason to pass over. Clare, on the other hand, is motherless and her father, a college-educated janitor and alcoholic, is killed in a saloon when she is only fifteen years old. Thus, in her formative years, Clare’s immediate family unit is stripped from her; she is uprooted from her community and from her familiar surroundings. These parental omissions may best explain what the black community calls Clare’s “having way” about her (22). Although it is evident that Clare has it “in” her to get what she wants, the lack of an immediate family connection shapes her self-interested nature.

Clare’s background plays an integral part in why she decides to pass over. For black women at the turn-of-the-century, status was important, serving as one’s connection to society. Most women during the early-to-mid 1900s were still operating out of the societal expectations based on the cult of true womanhood, where their status was almost always connected to a man’s, either that of their fathers’ or that their husbands’. Barbara Welter states,

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together, they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman. Without them... all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power [emphasis mine]. (152)
For Clare, passing seemed the most beneficial option if she desired to upgrade her lowly status, especially since she looks white and needed to get away from her overly religious white aunts, who treated her like the hired help. Clare tells Irene about her aunts in an initial encounter. She states, “‘Being good Christians,’ she continued, ‘when dad came to his tipsy end, they did their duty and gave me a home of sorts. I was, it was true, expected to earn my keep by doing all the housework and most of the washing. . .Besides, to their notion, hard labour [sic] was good for me. I had Negro blood. . .’” (32-33). Clare’s longing for a better lifestyle results in her hiding her identity as a biologically black woman. This rationale was instilled in her as her aunts told her not to reveal to anyone in their neighborhood that she had “Negro blood”: “‘They forbade me to mention [silence] Negroes to the neighbors or to even mention the south side. You may be sure that I didn’t’ [emphasis mine]” (34). Thus, the reality of race passing is dependent on secrecy, for the revelation of it dismantles.

Although this novel may be read for its many layers, we can neither ignore nor deny its “surface” connection to heritage. With the epigraph from Countee Cullen’s “Heritage,” Larsen’s intent—communal connection—is no secret. Clare’s longing to return to the black community, despite the world of access she has as a “white” woman, means little to her if it does not include those unnamed, indescribable cultural nuances that she misses. She willingly risks it all just to be in the midst of the black community and its middle-class lifestyle, for which she traded for the material privileges of whiteness. Thus for Clare, Africa to her is that connectivity to something unexplainable, and as Irene noted to Hugh Wentworth, something intangible (118).

Similar to Johnson, Larsen also incorporates the trickster figure in *Passing*. Throughout, Larsen presents both Clare and Irene as deceptive, tricksters who conjure up specific attributes
that allow them to mediate accordingly. Within his explanation of Esu, Gates notes that the trickster possesses various qualities, all of which may reveal themselves at any time. These traits, which are clearly present in either Clare or Irene at one time or another, include “individuality . . . ambiguity, sexuality . . . disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty. . . encasement and rupture [emphasis mine]” (6). Collectively, these traits form the trickster figure, Esu.

In African American culture, this figure is the Signifying Monkey. Since Gates states that Esu takes on all of these qualities, one trait must not be privileged over the other (6). Most obvious, perhaps, is that Irene and Clare’s ability to pass speaks to their ambiguity and the manner in which they dupe society based on their appearances. Yet, the protagonists reveal their trickster traits in various ways.

Clare’s individuality, or independence, may be an initial result of her orphaned status. Yet, she flaunts it thereafter. Via her white husband, John (Jack) Bellew, Clare steers herself to her final destination in New York with “her own people” (74). She accomplishes this feat by duping Jack at a young age. Using her plight as an orphaned girl with strict aunts who would hear nothing of her getting married, Clare plots and sets her plan in motion, even telling Irene how simple it was to get over on John. Clare states, “I had no great difficulty in convincing him that it was useless to talk marriage to the aunts. So, on that day that I was eighteen, we went off and were married. So that’s that. Nothing could have been easier” (35). The ease of Clare’s deceit signals her ultimate intent to trick for access.

Irene also uses her ambiguous appearance to deceive. As the novel opens, we are introduced to Irene and her memories of the encounters she has with Clare. Once Irene reaps the benefits of the air-conditioned luxury of the Drayton Hotel lobby, enjoying the escape from the
summer heat, she faces the gaze of a white woman whom she perceives as strange. In her attempt to dupe society, either intentionally or unintentionally, Irene feels threatened that the gaze has determined her true identity. Irene thinks, “Did that woman [Clare], could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?” (16). With Irene’s thoughts, Larsen journeys into the psyche of the passing female, who, despite her outer appearance, feels her race susceptible to interpretation and discernible to an onlooker. Clare’s gaze disrupts Irene’s secret passing scheme, making Irene self-conscious about her “harmless” deception.

For Irene, her trickery functions as a means to correct or to protest a societal wrong based on status, not as a way to undermine or hurt people, as she feels is the case with Clare’s risky behavior. In passing, Irene signifies on the race as a construct, using it as the sole basis for access to white privileges. However Clare’s deceptive presence threatens to uproot Irene and foil her performance as a white woman. For Irene, principle matters much more than desire. She grows overly concerned with appearances and she does not want to be humiliated: “It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, that disturbed her” (16-17). In this way, we see transference of power based on who actually dupes whom. Initially, Irene operates as the trickster, signifying on society’s segregation laws. As arbitrary as the construct of race is, Clare waltzes into the hotel and dupes the Irene with her ambiguous appearance. We will recall that Irene did, indeed, think Clare was white when she first spots her (16). Clare then becomes for Irene the Signifying Monkey whose ambiguous deception disturbs Irene’s own. Given this context, the secrecy involved in their identity connects to the origin of the trickster figure.
Larsen makes it plain that Clare does not care whom she deceives or how she tricks. Ultimately, Clare wants what her heart wants, and for her, that desire is to return to the black community. She will stop at nothing to obtain it, even if it means putting her newfound friends in dangerous situations. For instance, Clare’s husband Jack is unaware that she has “Negro” blood. Again, Larsen flirts with the randomness of race based on appearances. Ironically, Jack calls Clare “Nig” because he says she has grown darker over time; he even calls her “Nig” in front of guests, specifically Gertrude and Irene, both of whom have been invited to Clare’s when Jack surprisingly shows up (55). They must pass in his presence, however, and each of them plays along, almost instinctively. Perhaps their support of one another during this awkward moment reflects the continuation of African culture, specifically of black women’s attempts to survive and remain connected, an attempt to create “themselves” that is centered not in her individuality, but by “their connection with community” (West, African Spirituality 31). This finding speaks to the idea that females who decide to pass tend to do so in groups. There is another homeland connection that may explain this communal act. A number of historical accounts note that Igbos presented traders with the most run-a-ways, and of those who escaped Igbos were the most popular. Furthermore, those women who escaped did so in groups (Gomez, Exchanging 121). This fact speaks to desire for communal links within black communities. Although Clare places Irene and Gertrude in a precarious situation, they acquiesce and continue to pass because Jack’s presence thwarts their relaxed dia-

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2 West cites Phillis Wheatley’s poetry as an attempt to create and establish communal ties via her imagination. This imaginative transport may be linked to “rituals of African spiritual possession that [Wheatley] likely witnessed as a young child in Africa” (31).
logue within the secret society of their newly-founded sisterhood. Clare establishes a link with them, specifically with Irene. She is, for Clare, her liaison to black middle-class accesses.

Although John thinks he jokes with the women, he is the one who has been duped in more ways than one: with Clare, of course, because he married her, but also because everyone else in the room knows that he is clueless that all of the women in the room are indeed black. Brian, Irene’s husband, notes the humor in deceiving by passing. In a conversation with Irene about the infamous Bellew incident, Brian notes that it was Irene who had the control, not Jack. Brian states, “‘But it seems to me,’ he pointed out, ‘that you, my dear, had all the advantage. . . .’ It has, you will admit, its humorous side, and sometimes, its conveniences’ [emphasis mine]” (80). These conveniences are the sole reason Irene claims that she passes. In other words, Irene passes on, as Jennifer Brody labels it, “principled passing” (1058). For Irene, principled passing is acceptable, where as “play passing” is not. Clare acts, performs, or “play passes” (1058), a form also seen in the protagonist Mattie in Jessie Redmon Fauset’s Plum Bun (1929). In this novel by Larsen’s Black female contemporary, Mattie’s passing is described as a “weakness”, something “harmless” that she does for fun on occasion (19). It doesn’t bother her husband, Junius, one bit. He states, “‘My dear girl, I told you long ago that where no principle was involved, your passing means nothing to me. It’s just a little joke. . . .’ [emphasis mine]” (19). However for Irene, passing for play is no joke; it is far too dangerous.

At the novel’s onset, Irene uses her ambiguous identity and principle passing to access those luxuries traditionally afforded to whites only. Appearing to be all about racial uplift, Irene socializes with various Negro-based organizations that put her image in the fore front. She is always hosting a party, preparing a get-together, running an errand, or shopping, all qualities of
a respectable 1920s black middle-class woman. Yet, it is clear that her skin color affords her the opportunity to perform all of these duties without the humiliation and insult that Clare’s presence stirs. Irene easily makes her purchases in various shops and with a mere wave of her hand, hails taxi. Larsen carefully notes the extra attention afforded to white ladies, as the taxi driver recognizes a “white” Irene. He “almost lift[s] her in” the car, he “[springs] out and open[s] her car door (11). In a way, Irene should not necessarily be shunned for passing here. Mary Condé reminds us of the political statement black women who could pass would make if they did so. Condé states, “It should be remember what powerful inducements there were for African-American women to pass, even if only on a temporary basis, right up to 1964, when . . . the first comprehensive package of anti-discrimination legislation since Reconstruction, imposed legal, enforced penalties for the barring of black people from any kind of social space” (94). Effortlessly, Irene enters the Drayton and makes her way to the roof where she is escorted to her seat in front of a window (12), similar to the same window out of which Clare eventually falls. The ease of navigation for a woman of color, one who possesses the appearance of whiteness, speaks to Irene’s subversive intent. Surely, she enjoyed all of the same attention a white woman gets, which is perhaps why she rarely goes out in public with her husband, except when he drops her off in various places. Yet, to deny a person solely based on race was the basis of Irene’s protest. Thus to reap the benefits of whiteness, she passes for social access.

Irene’s crucial faux pas, however, is her public and close association with women who are clearly black. While shopping with Felise, whose curly hair and darker complexion signal her blackness, Irene runs directly into John Bellew (155). On the one hand, Irene’s one wish that Clare’s secret identity would somehow be discovered has manifested itself. Then, according to
Irene’s initial logic, she would be free of Clare. However, in Bellew seeing Irene arm in arm with Felise, Irene too, must be black. On the other hand, Bellew reasons that if Irene is black by association, then that must also mean that his wife Clare is black as well. Larsen carefully records the areas of silence as Irene recognizes the disgust in Bellew’s face as he sees the two women together:

‘Mrs. Redfield!’

His hat came off. He held out his hand, smiling. . . But the smile faded at once. . .

He had, Irene knew, become conscious of Felise, golden, with curly black Negro hair. . .he looked at her again and then back at Felise. And displeasure. . .He didn’t, however, with draw his outstretched hand. . . Irene didn’t take it.

*Instinctively, in the first glance of recognition, her face had become a mask.* . . she gave him the cool appraising stare. . . and drew Felise on [emphasis mine].

(155)

Irene’s instincts are not only to reject Bellew’s hand, but to also remain silent. What could she say? What would she say? How would she explain Felise’s presence if she were a white woman, publically linked while shopping with a Black woman? Socially, there would be no logical explanation for their being together in such an intimate fashion. At this, Irene knows that the jig is up, as Felise’s presence ruins, or as Larsen calls it, queers³ Irene’s previous and future performances (155). With this incident, which she keeps a secret from both Clare and Brian, Irene’s jeopardizes her white card and Clare’s as well.

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³ Larsen’s discourse for being spoiled, undone or ruined. Queered also means “unusual” or “strange” and is slang for homosexual. See Larsen’s note, number 3 (200-01).
Unlike Irene, Clare passes over for access to the lifestyle she did not have as a lowly child surrounded by elitist-minded blacks, such as Irene. Her motivation stems from her lack: lack of a mother, a father, a community, and, above all, means. Notably, she passes over for the same reason as Johnson’s ex-colored man. The text makes clear Clare’s drive for status, even one much better than Irene’s and the elitist neighborhood girls who distanced themselves from Clare. She shares, “‘Then, too, I wanted things. I knew I wasn’t bad-looking and that I could ‘pass.’ You know, ‘Rene. . . I used to almost hate all of you. You all had all the things I wanted and never had. It made me more determined to get them, and others’ [emphasis mine]” (34).

Since a woman’s status was connected to her husband’s, Clare passes with the hopes of obtaining access to a financially stable man. As she tells Irene, John Bellew, or Jack as she refers to him, had returned from South America with “untold gold,” after which time Clare stopped her visits to the predominantly Negro section of Chicago and “slipped off to meet him instead” (35). With Clare’s “abandonment” of the black community in favor of a life with Jack, Larsen highlights Clare’s economic and status-minded goals.

Brody substantiates this point, adding that in passing for access, Clare attempts “to move closer to the Black middle-class that once rejected her for being part of the ‘poorer brethren’” (1060). Luckily for Clare, though, she not only moves closer to Irene’s position, she surpasses it. In other words, Clare’s return to Irene serves to validate Clare; her visual success is evident because Irene comments on it in her overview of Clare. Clare’s serendipitous encounter with Irene ultimately makes Irene feel subpar, as Irene explains why she’s never considered passing over. Irene states, “‘You see Clare, I’ve everything I want. Except, perhaps, a little more money’ [emphasis mine] (36). The disclaimer that Irene offers verifies that for the first time,
Clare supersedes Irene, financially and, aesthetically for that matter. This initial meeting sets the tone for the threat that Clare poses, which in this instance results from Clare hiding her identity as a black woman and gaining economic security.

In Clare’s discourse, Larsen reveals the secretive, deceptive manner in which she decides to operate in order to catch Jack. Although the lack Clare experienced in her past supports her pursuit of Jack, we should also consider the deception involved in her quest for status and economic security a surviving trait of the transport. In other words, this “having way” about Clare may be deeply rooted in practices particular to the trickster figure topos. Gates posits that the trickster topos found throughout black cultures “functions as a sign of the disrupted wholeness of an African system of meaning and belief that black slaves recreated from memory, preserved by oral narration, improvised upon in ritual. . . and willed to their own subsequent generations, as hermetically sealed and encoded charts of cultural descent [emphasis mine]” (5). Since Clare’s father was black and she was reared in a black community, we can assume that her white appearance did not negate the transference of those traits that willed her to act as trickster figure. As Gates notes with the many definitions of Signifyin(g), one of which means “lying” or deceiving, “Signifyin(g) is an adult ritual, which black people learn as adolescents, almost exactly like children learned the traditional figures of signification in classically structured Western primary and secondary schools, training one hopes shall be returned to contemporary education” (Signifying Monkey 75). Thus, Clare’s past informs her impending attack.

Similar to Johnson’s narrator who tricks society and decides to pass to reap the benefits associated with whiteness, Clare tricks Jack. He is, for Clare, her prey. Irene frequently describes her movement as cat-like, and Clare’s word choice substantiates Irene’s observations.
Clare is aggressive, “attacking from below” and getting a rise out of Irene, “reduc[ing her] to react” (Brody 1056). In this way, we continue to see Clare as the Signifying Monkey for both Jack and Irene. Just as is Jack oblivious, so is Irene. Clare’s signifyin(g) on Irene works solely because Irene is unaware that Clare’s intentions are to get her to react. As Gates states of the Dirty Dozens, which is a form of signifyin(g), “The object of the game is to test emotional strength. The first person to give in to anger is the loser” (68). Clearly, Irene loses here because she becomes enraged with Clare’s presence.

Within this novel, protection factors as the medium for which secrets are withheld. Irene “attempts” to hide Clare’s identity by remaining silent on her own racial identity. In the initial meeting with John Bellew, Irene masks herself blackness, yet she cannot seem to fathom the reason: “Why in the face of Bellew’s ignorant hate and aversion, had she concealed her own origin?” (75). Irene reasons that her duty is to maintain the racial ties—“she was bound to [Clare] by those very ties of race, which [. . .] Clare had been unable to completely sever” (75).

As a member of the black community with connections to an ancestral culture that maintains and, some would argue, privileges secrecy, Irene feels it her duty to remain silent. However we are aware that Irene’s motives run even deeper. They are self-serving and protective in nature. Irene sees Clare as a threat to her marriage and its overall security. Her motivation for keeping Clare’s secret concerns her own family stability within an already shaky union. To protect her family unit, Irene rationalizes that keeping Clare’s identity a secret will demonstrate loyalty (75), which is one of the trickster’s traits (75). In this way, Irene’s true intentions regarding Clare’s secret set Clare up to be signified upon. This example of withholding may be seen as an overall attempt to remain dutiful to Clare, when in reality Larsen reveals that it serves to shield
Irene from what she believes will be an impending attack. Irene’s secrecy here is, thus, ancestral in nature and deceptively loyal.

Irene masks her loyalty to Clare under the guise of protection; in reality, Irene thinks only of herself. Clare’s protection proves a mere cover because Irene wants to protect her own family unit. Irene’s preoccupation with appearances results in her break with reality, which is fueled by Clare’s looming presence in her life. Even when Clare is not physically present, Irene thinks of her and of the perceived threat Clare poses to her family. We must also remember that Clare’s beauty is a constant comment. Her lips, hair, skin, and eyes seduce not only the men at the Negro Welfare League functions, both colored and white, but Irene as well. Larsen writes, “She’d done it again. Allowed Clare Kendry to persuade her into promising to do something for which she had neither time nor any special desire. What was it about Clare’s voice that was so appealing, so very seductive?” (43-44). If we think as Deborah McDowell, that desire is Irene’s repressed sexual desire. Shortly after Irene questions herself, Clare kisses her when they meet in the hallway to Clare’s home (44). Of course, Larsen neither reveals the location of this kiss nor indicates whether or not any feelings were stirred by it.

Larsen further reveals the complexities involved in protective secrets. We can see how, cross culturally, secrecy plays out. As Clare moves closer and closer to Irene, their past connections threaten both women’s marriages. Irene feels threatened that her husband Brian is having an affair with Clare; thus her compliance in keeping both her and Clare’s tied identities a secret: Irene “shook her head, unable to speak, for there was a choking in her throat, and the confusion in her mind was like the beating of wings [emphasis mine]” (137). This confusion suggests Irene’s sexual attraction to Clare. Irene feels that Brian may see the same tempting
qualities in Clare that she sees. Irene’s confusion may also stem from Clare’s cavalier attitude towards blacks and her deception regarding John. These aspects compromise Irene’s identity. Irene says to Clare: “You’ve got to admit that there’s his side to this thing. You didn’t tell him you were colored, so he’s got no way of knowing about this hankering of yours after Negroes, or that it galls you to fury to hear them called niggers and black devils” (107). Protection for them both ultimately proves out of reach. Either Clare “accidently” falls out of a window that Irene opens, or Irene pushes her, having gone mad at the very thought and what she believed to be her confirmed suspicious of an affair.

Multiple interpretations have been presented on how *Passing* should be read, most notably McDowell’s perspective that *Passing* is passing as a novel centered on race. In her introduction to the novel, McDowell claims that *Passing* operates as a cover for a larger story on female sexual desire and female exploration, one which could not be told in such a shielded place and space, especially for women for whom the risks were great. Thus for McDowell, Larsen tricks the reader into thinking that the text’s central focus is race, when for her and many others who subscribe to this perspective, the main point surrounds black female sexuality. She states, “We might say that Larsen wanted to tell the story of the black woman with sexual desires, but was constrained by a competing desire to establish black women as respectable in black middle-class terms. The latter desire committed her to exploring black female sexuality *obliquely*, and, inevitably, to permitting it only within the context of marriage. . . [emphasis mine]” (xvi). Claudia Tate reiterates the sexual reading of *Passing* as “infantile sexuality” (141). Further Kathleen Pfeiffer states that *Passing* “operates as the primary euphemism for death” and that Clare’s letters foretell of her impending death (139). If we consider these points, then
not only are the characters operating out of the secret trope, so is Larsen. In hiding an erotic narrative that covers as a critique on race or to indicate Clare’s demise, Larsen uses the secret legacy to trick some of her readership with her encoded intentions.

However, if we are to agree with McDowell’s findings and interpretations, we will also discover that her points connect directly to homeland transports, more specifically, Igbo’s cultural practices. Although impossible to verify, it is indeed noteworthy to mention that both Irene and Clare share similar qualities that historians assign to Igbo. If we are to believe that Clare commits suicide at the novel’s end, and if we consider the similar traits she posses with traditional Igbo, her suicide may be plausible. If we consider the myth of the flying African, this connection is convincing. In short, when place in distressful situations, the African will “fly” away, either physically, or in Irene’s case, psychologically. Irene’s psychological flight may be first seen in the initial scene prior to the encounter with Clare. Instead of being attacked/threatened by a person/circumstance, Irene seeks solace from the sun and heat. Larsen writes, “It was, she thought, like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below” (12). Irene uses her imagination to transport her to another place more ideal than the one she physically occupies. This is similar to West’s position on Wheatley’s imaginative homeland transports.

Early descriptions of Clare’s character note that she takes her own portion of some money that she’d made so that she could purchase a red dress to wear to the church picnic (5). Similarly, Igbo women were noted to be independent. As Gomez records, “An Igbo woman had the right to keep any money that she earned ‘by her own efforts’” (126-27). Gomez further traces the practice of “female husbands.” He notes,
The Igbo institution of ‘woman marriage’ also merits some attention. According to this arrangement, a ‘female husband’ could pay the bride-wealth for a maiden and ‘dispose of her rights’ in the bride by either allowing her husband to cohabitate with her and accept her as a cowife or by allowing the bride to establish her own compound and choosing a lover (*iko*) for her based on the female husband’s own criteria. (127)

What Gomez offers in argument for the transport is two-fold: not only does he corroborate McDowell’s interpretation of *Passing* as a cover, he substantiates the overall transference of culture within African American texts. Given McDowell’s reading of *Passing*, this maintained cultural practice may have been what Irene attempts to protect and simultaneously flee—this sexual desire for what ancestrally could have been transferred to Clare and to her. The purple ink, which is the “emblematic color of lesbianism” (Danita Smith 20), the strangeness of the envelope Irene receives, and Irene’s dreading “the idea of opening and reading it” (4) support a reading of repressed female sexual desire. So, what do all of these connections suggest for legacy of secrecy within African American literature? In the same way that the previously mentioned cultural practices may inform our readings of African American literature, so too should those specifically recognizable elements. If we look to Africa, as Larsen’s epigraph suggests, we may more readily notice those cultural signifiers that permeate African American literature.

Therefore, the interdependence of passing and secrecy must not be missed. Irene and Clare demonstrate through their trickery, their manner of access, and their intent to protect that passing possesses both initial benefits and ultimate drawbacks. With it, new lives can begin. However, maintaining those lives presents the types of struggles that these characters
perhaps had not considered, such as a mundane life, alienation, paranoia, mental breakdowns, a longing for the unattainable, and even death. Without it, their lives might susceptible to constant ridicule, public shame, and inquiries about to which group they belong. Either way, keeping secrets about one’s identity, in a setting where identity is the basis of privilege, access, and equal treatment proves to be problematic for these passing characters.
3 PROTECTING THE FAMILY STRUCTURE: RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES ON SECRECY IN JAMES BALDWIN’S *GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN* AND ALICE WALKER’S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

In “Rootedness: The Ancestral Foundation” (1984), Toni Morrison writes, “If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything” (497). Morrison’s words echo the significance of family and extended community within the African American psyche. Since their arrival to the New World, African-derived people have sought to “maintain a culture consistent with their traditions and beliefs” (West, *African Spirituality in Black Women’s Fiction* 16). This continuation of culture privileges communal connections, and we may see this emphasis on family and community throughout African American literature.

This chapter examines family and community and the secrets within in James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982). To maintain and to protect their positions in their families and their communities, Baldwin’s and Walker’s characters demonstrate their willingness to keep family secrets. If revealed, these secrets (some of which violate transported and converted beliefs) have the potential to separate the secret keepers from their family and community. Baldwin and Walker further suggest Westernized religious beliefs as a motive for withholding information. That is, the clash between African spiritual beliefs and Eurocentric beliefs drive the characters’ actions to remain silent. This silence, then, works to protect familial and communal structures.
3.1 The Black Church and African Spiritual Integrations

In the same way John S. Mbiti’s *African Religion*, or African spirituality, is an integral part of the African-derived person’s life, so too is the black church for many African Americans. The traditions established within the black church helped to set the foundation for the practices African Americans continue to rely on, from those traditions that increase African Americans’ beliefs that their conditions would improve over time, to those practices that helped African Americans testify how they “made it over.” Slave songs relayed messages of freedom, humanity, and secret gatherings. These songs evolved into symbols of the strides African Americans made in their pursuits of perceived personhood. Before the traditions established in the black church, there were countless pre-Middle Passage transports from African-derived peoples who “accepted” Christianity with their own revisions. Jacob K. Olupona explains,

But as a result of Africa’s contact with the outside world, especially under very ignominious circumstances—exploration, slave trade, and colonialism—significant aspects of these traditions were lost or modified to conform to the taste of the conquerors and the new rulers. A central event in the African’s encounter with colonialism was the former’s conversion to Islam and Christianity and their imbibing of new religious traditions from the Middle East and Europe. Africans responded to this encounter with *resistance* and *fierceness* and in most cases adopted the new spirituality by domesticating the new traditions and making them *truly African*. It is very difficult to continue to call Islam and Christianity in Africa foreign religions because they have been thoroughly changed and adapted to African taste and sensibility [emphasis mine]. (xv)
In Canaan Land (1999), Albert Raboteau states that during slavery, those practices specific to African religious traditions “continued within and alongside Christian practices. . .The ring shout, the circular counterclockwise movements that inspired religious trances among the slaves, closely resembled religious dances in Africa, the Caribbean, and Brazil that also brought worshippers into states of trance. . . their clapping duplicated the rhythmic drive of the drums that was so crucial in African worship” (52). There were integrations such as conjuring and charisms\(^4\) that African-derived peoples meshed with Christianity, so much so that they began to resist Christianity’s ideals (Raboteau, *Slave Religion* 287). Thus for many African-based communities, conjure continues to be an integral part of their culture, reconciling aspects of their belief systems that Westernized concepts of religion just could not (288). By the mid-1960s, people from throughout the diaspora who migrated to the United States brought with them beliefs in African spirits (127). These transferences that African Americans incorporated into their worship experiences ultimately grew into black church experiences. Against this backdrop, both Baldwin and Walker construct their novels and the spiritual conflicts within the African-derived psyche.

### 3.2 *Go Tell It on the Mountain*: The Pentecostal Church and Family Secrecy

Ernest Champion calls James Baldwin’s first novel a “testimony to a phase in Baldwin’s life when the black church was the only institution that allowed him and his family to retain some dignity and identity” (35). Critically acclaimed, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* chronicles the successes and failures of the Grimes family—Gabriel, Deborah, Florence, Elizabeth, and the protagonist, John. The Grimes family is led by the patriarchal, financially unsuccessful, Pentecostal

\(^4\) Special spiritual gifts. See *Slave Religion*. 
minister Gabriel, whose past suggests that he was anything but angelic. This family has a diverse, secretive history, revealed through Baldwin’s use of the black Pentecostal church as a vehicle for carrying the migration narrative.\(^5\) Baldwin achieves this via flashbacks linked to each character’s chapter. Carol E. Henderson attests to the significance of the reflective narrative strategy: “Baldwin’s use of flashbacks is important in setting both the psychological and spiritual conditions for John’s experiences on the threshing floor” (152). These flashbacks perhaps also critique Pentecostalism’s emphasis of breaking from the past, thus being saved. Bernard W. Bell highlights this connection in *The Afro-American Novels and Its Traditions*. He states, “From the prayers whispered at the breakfast table to those intoned during tarry services, the Grimes family dramatizes the tradition of black folks taking their troubles to the Lord in prayer and bearing witness to the spiritual imperativeness of being born again” (226). Through restricted prayer meetings\(^6\) and tarry services,\(^7\) black Pentecostal core members could achieve this goal.

Throughout the novel, Baldwin demonstrates family secrets that plague all the major characters. In contrast to the previous chapters, I focus on secrets that link to a communal African ethos. Most of the secrets that drive Baldwin’s plot are shrouded in Westernized religious beliefs; thus, they are considered sinful. Therefore, these secrets inform us of a potential reason why African Americans tend to hold onto and to maintain secrecy—the family/communal structure. In other words, in their pre-Middle Passage settings, family and communal stability were integrated into African spirituality. To remain connected to family and to the community,

\(^5\) Ancestors and strangers return, and characters demonstrate cultural remembrances of their past lives in the South after migrating to the North. See Hazel Arnett Ervin’s “migration narrative” explanation in *The Handbook of African American Literature* (85).

\(^6\) See Stephanie Parker’s *Led by the Spirit: Toward a Practical Theology of Pentecostal Discernment and Decision Making* for the discussion of exclusivity within prayer meetings (36).

\(^7\) Services that asked congregants to wait on God’s blessings. See *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (445).
Baldwin’s major characters withhold vital information and use Western religion as the basis of the withholdings. To understand the characters’ motives for their silences, we must consider the specifics of Western religious practices. For Baldwin’s characters, that consideration is Pentecostalism.

Birgit Meyer explains that the Pentecostal belief about the past: “‘Make a complete break with the past’ is an often-heard cry in pentecostalist [sic] circles” (316). Those immersed in the faith must “renounce actively all past sinful attitudes” (323). Vinson Synan echoes Meyer’s point, noting that Pentecostals were to avoid sins of the social nature as well, such as “the evil effects of the theatre, ball games, dancing, lipstick, cigarettes, and liquor” (47). Equally, Pentecostals were not to involve themselves in solitary activities. Similar to the communal aspects of African spiritual beliefs, Pentecostals operate in the spirit of community; where there is community, there is more protection from temptation. Meyer further notes that Pentecostals emphasized being baptized “in the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues (glossolalia), divine healing, and . . . personal prayers” (321). Andrew Singleton asserts that of all Christians, Pentecostals stress the importance of healing others physically (123). While the importance of community in Pentecostalism is evident, we can also see how some of its tenets conflict with African spirituality and beliefs. For the African-derived person, the failure to revisit the past, which for Baldwin’s Gabriel includes recognizing his bloodline, conflicts with an African centered worldview. Thus, with Baldwin’s characters, we may witness how their actions are informed by the Pentecostal concepts, beginning with Gabriel.

Baldwin elucidates Gabriel’s flaws within Pentecostalism and African spirituality. In short, Gabriel fails to seek communal protections and operates individually, in both his conver-
sion and within his family. While living in the South, a young Gabriel lives a fast life and spends most of his time drinking, fornicating, and “returning from the harlot’s house” (Baldwin 88). Since he is not yet “saved,” Gabriel involves himself in all of those social sins in which Pentecostals should not participate. However, he soon experiences his lowest point, hitting rock bottom at the age of twenty-one. In private, Gabriel humbles himself and asks for God’s help: “Oh, Lord, have mercy! Oh Lord, have mercy on me!” (92). God saves him from his previous sins, and he vows to serve God. However, Baldwin highlights the importance of community, noting that at the point of Gabriel’s redemption, no one, but God, witnesses his salvation. Gabriel falls to the threshing ground alone in the mud with a “lone tree” (91). His lack of accountability for his sins makes him more vulnerable to the impending sins of the world. Since there are no family or community members present, Baldwin foreshadows Gabriel’s imminent fall.

To show Gabriel’s need for communal support, Baldwin utilizes the type of woman with whom Gabriel previously associates, Esther. Soon after his conversion, Gabriel marries Deborah and becomes a well-known preacher, seemingly abandoning his previous lifestyle. Ironically, after his religious conversion Gabriel participates in a secret sexual affair with Esther, a “worldly” girl who has yet to come to the Lord. She notes, “I done made up my mind. . . to live all I can while I can. If that’s a sin, well, I’ll go on down to Hell and pay for it” (122). Esther is one who attends church in attire that Pentecostal tradition suggests is sinful, that which made the congregation and Gabriel aware that she was indeed a sinner (115). Despite Gabriel’s newly established position within the black Pentecostal church, Baldwin reveals Gabriel’s inability to free himself from his prior self. From the pulpit, Gabriel immediately notices Esther because of

8 Born again and turned away from a sinful past.
his past experiences with women of her caliber. In spite of Esther’s exterior, or perhaps because of it, Gabriel secretly lusts for her. He contrasts Deborah with Esther: “[H]ow black and how bony was this wife of his, and how wholly undesirable. . .he felt the hand that held his Bible begin to sweat and tremble; he thought of the joyless groaning of their marriage bed; and he hated her” (115). In this moment, Baldwin elucidates that Gabriel’s past desire for “loose” women had not been exorcised from him. With no one present at his threshing floor experience, Gabriel has no support or interception from the church or community, which foreshadows his eventual affair with Esther. Baldwin clearly echoes the Pentecostal beliefs in communal support and encouragement, as he describes Gabriel’s fall: “. . .how they found themselves on the floor at last, sweating and groaning and locked together; locked away from all others, all heavenly or human help. Only they could help each other. They were alone in the world [emphasis mine]” (124).

Unlike Gabriel, Esther operates from an Afro-centered mindset, perhaps because she is neither a member of the immediate church family, nor is she a deeply religious Pentecostal. Baldwin hints that, although Esther is far from the church, she possesses more family values than Gabriel. In a pivotal scene, Baldwin shows that although Gabriel consents to pay her off to leave town, Esther first mentions family as her most important reason for keeping their sexual history a secret. She states, “I would go through this town. . . and tell everybody about the Lord’s anointed. Only reason I don’t is because I don’t want my mama and daddy [emphasis mine] to know what a fool I’ve been. I ain’t ashamed of it—I’m ashamed of you. . .” (131-32). Esther’s comment reveals the importance of connection within her immediate family. She values it so much so that she will remain silent in order to protect them from the public shame
that their daughter was involved with a married minister. As bell hooks notes in *Rock My Soul* (2003), “Shaming is one way to intimidate and break the spirit (37). In this way, Esther’s secrecy connects to the tradition of silences within African American culture, those that seek to shield the family name from ridicule. Despite society’s perception of her, Esther’s immediate family matters to her. She further realizes that “everybody” includes her parents, thus her desire to protect them.

This brief sexual encounter results in Esther’s pregnancy, thus Gabriel’s need for things to remain silent: “‘Hush,’ he said, with a calm that astonished him, ‘we going to do something, just you be quiet.’ ‘What we going to do, Gabriel? Tell me-what you a fixing in your mind to do?’” (126). This need for secrecy is shrouded within Western religious beliefs. Since Gabriel’s actions demonstrate that he has not strayed from his past, public knowledge of his adultery would clash with Pentecostalism. In addition to this conflict, Gabriel further separates Esther from her family and community. Perhaps drawing on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne,9 Baldwin’s Esther must bear the social stigma of her participation in their affair by leaving the fold. In other words, Gabriel reasons that the solution to their affair is to send Esther off alone to birth the proof of their sinful act. From an African-centered perspective, this act renders Esther inhuman. As Kofi Opoku notes, “To be human means to belong to a family or community. . . One’s humanity is defined by a sense of belonging. . .” (76). Once banished, Esther no longer fits this description. Not only is Esther inhuman, she is no longer within Gabriel’s purview. Esther’s communal banishment, Trudier Harris explains, contributes to her imminent death. Having no support system to assist her, “Esther dies and Gabriel thrives; her femininity has been her fail-

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9Hester Prynne must bear brand of her adultery with Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*. Baldwin’s play on Esther’s name in place of Hawthorne’s Hester may also demonstrate this draw.
ure and her life outside the church has ensured the possibility of that failure [emphasis mine]” (49). Although Baldwin does not detail Ether’s demise, we can surmise that her separation from family and community renders her spiritually devoid, thus deceased.

Baldwin connects Gabriel’s attempt to undermine Esther’s pregnancy by also critiquing Gabriel’s status as a minister. Not only does he have an affair and impregnate Esther, Gabriel is also a thief. He secretly takes money from Deborah to pay for Esther’s exile to Chicago (Baldwin 133). Ironically, this theft connects to a clandestine preaching assignment which he hopes will pay off his theft. Just as John Bradshaw’s assertion that dark family secrets eventually expose themselves via generational avenues (xiii), Gabriel’s love child, Royal, returns south to live with Gabriel’s grandparents after Esther passes away. Royal’s presence causes Gabriel daily anxiety. This concern stems from the townspeople’s views of Royal’s wicked behavior, as well as the constant threat the community may see the old Gabriel in the new Royal, thus linking him to Gabriel as his father. As Baldwin notes, “‘Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they never fail to imitate them’” (qtd. in Bradshaw 36). With Gabriel, Baldwin demonstrates that the sins of his past require communal support. Gabriel tells no one of his affair or of his illegitimate child because his shameful act discredits him both as a married man, as a responsible father, and as a man of a Christian God.

After such a trying life of sin, why would Gabriel revert to his former unsaved self? We may argue that he backslides because his flesh grows weak or perhaps because Satan in the form of Esther makes him do it. Laurel Richardson would assert that Gabriel’s affair is based on a power issue. She posits that people who engage in forbidden relationships do so based on unequal power structures: “Secret sexual liaisons are likely to be power-imbalanced relation-
ships” (210). Richardson’s position helps to shed light on Gabriel’s secret affair resulting from something other than a momentary slip up or a religious faux pas. Thus, Esther’s being “worldly” or unsaved catapults the lowly servant of God, Gabriel, to a higher, more powerful status. Not only is he a preacher, thus by Richardson’s standards seemingly superior to Esther, he is also male. Esther is single and Gabriel is married. These opposites propel Gabriel and Esther as unequals.

However, there is another explanation of Gabriel’s indiscretions, one based on both Pentecostal salvation and African spirituality. Gabriel falls because he attempts salvation in secrecy. He fails to be saved publicly, within the space of those who would support him; therefore, he lacks the prayers and supplications of his community. As Opoku states, “Religion is an affair of the community of which the individual is a part and its moral prescriptions are for the betterment of the whole community. Religion itself is one with life and is not an isolated aspect of the community’s life but permeates every facet of the community’s existence [emphasis mine]” (77). Meyer suggests that in the Pentecostal faith, in order to avoid the “ancestral curse,” that is, the sins of previous generations affecting the blood line (323), Gabriel should have been in a public place so that others could witness, reinforce, and encourage him along his walk. Meyer states, “The reason why even born again believers may still be affected by ancestral curses is that, salvation being an individual affair, a person may have failed to renounce these forces personally in order to break the covenant with Satan [emphasis mine]” (324). Synan implies that Gabriel’s solitary conversion places him in a very compromising position, for the Pentecostal faith “is said to believe that no one can be saved alone” (47). Gabriel’s religious
individualism further distances Gabriel from the tenets of African spirituality, where community is integral.

Baldwin shows the conflict between Pentecostalism and African spirituality as it concerns the act of forgetting. Again, ancestral and familial recognition are important in African spiritual beliefs. Morrison explains the significance of the ancestral connection, noting that some “contemporary” African American male writers such as “James Baldwin, were confounded and disturbed by the presence or absence of an ancestor. . . It is the absence of an ancestor that was frightening, that was threatening, and it caused a huge destruction and disarray in the work itself” (496). Although Royal is Gabriel’s son, not his ancestor, Morrison’s point, in fact, reinforces the need for community in African American culture. Gabriel’s secrecy thwarts this concept, however. He eventually tries to forget the part of his past that is tied to his bloodline, more specifically, his nameless son Royal. Therefore, Gabriel’s inevitable downfall is connected to his rejection of his past, and that secret past is Royal.

Baldwin further shows that Gabriel’s secret relates to the need to protect. Despite his effort to conceal his sexual indiscretions, Gabriel is a prime example that secrets have a way of revealing themselves, in spite of someone’s plans to impede them. Gabriel’s secret breaks, as his emotions overtake him. He holds the secret for so long that it purges itself out of him in front of the very individual from whom he attempted to conceal it. He weeps uncontrollably before Deborah upon hearing of his secret son’s death: “Then he began to cry, not making a sound, sitting at the table, and with his whole body shaking . . . Then it seemed that there was weeping everywhere, waters of anguish riding the world [emphasis mine]” (147). Gabriel’s lament demonstrates an attempt to connect him with Royal. His tears signal Deborah’s suspicions
about to whom Royal belonged. Gabriel finally admits, “‘Yes,’ . . . ‘that was my son’” (147). Although Gabriel’s final admission of paternity may be viewed as his compliance with his secret being discovered, Baldwin suggests otherwise. Upon closer examination, Gabriel’s discourse links him directly to Royal, solidifying his bloodline and proving his ownership of him. Albeit too late, Gabriel ultimately recognizes Royal as his family, although out of the public domain where the community could pray for the bereaved and offer condolences to the family.

Baldwin presents Deborah’s gang rape in secret terms as well. She navigates quietly; Baldwin suggests that she does so because there are no words for such traumas. As Joan Laird posits, “Severely traumatic experiences. . . defy language, and when such experiences are finally put into words they are often misdescribed” (248). Before Deborah marries Gabriel, she is brutally raped by some of the white townsmen. This unfortunate assault resulted in her being viewed as spoiled goods, “beyond the gates of any honorable man’s desire” (94). Even so-called Christian men, the elders of Gabriel’s church, crudely comment on Deborah’s traumatic experience: “[T]here was a holy woman, alright! She had been choked so early on white men’s milk, and it remained so sour in her belly yet, that she would never be able, now to find a nigger who would let her taste his rich, sweeter substance” (104).

Deborah internalizes her secret shame of this unspeakable act, despite the fact that everyone knew about her “‘accident’” (68). As Baldwin notes of Gabriel’s recollections, “[H]e tried to imagine. . . that dishonor to which Deborah had been forced so many years ago by white men: her skirts above her head, her secrecy discovered—by white men” (106). Perhaps Baldwin deems her rape too traumatic an event for her to reveal through words, for nowhere in the text do we witness Deborah’s own voice for her pain. Deborah keeps her interactions with both
men and women to a minimum, opting not to speak on her tragedy. The narrator notes that Deborah “kept her communication to yea and nay” (94). Keith Byerman suggests that those who experience painful events, such as acts of violence and violations similar to the rape that Deborah endures, use denial or repression as a coping mechanism (28). If, however, Deborah practices Pentecostalism, her silence about her past rape may be based on the belief that she should not revisit her past or the evils associated with it. bell hooks’s affirmation on the necessity to revisit trauma sheds light on the damaging effects of Deborah’s silence. She writes, “We must steadfastly work to recover and document the psychohistory of the politics of loss and abandonment that has been relentless and persistent, reenacting trauma on a collective and individual level” (24).

In addition to her secret shame, Deborah also fails to inform Gabriel that she is aware of his previous infidelity, theft, and illegitimate son. Initially, Gabriel deems Deborah a saint for her fortitude in dealing with her rape, with which he is unable to deal. Perhaps this angelic quality, as well as her desire to maintain their family unit, contributes to her harboring information that could destroy it. Baldwin hints that because of her rape, Deborah was lucky to have a husband, and we witness her rationale for wanting to protect this unit. Although we can also view Deborah’s loyalty as her Christian duty to remain with Gabriel until death separates them, Baldwin demonstrates that Deborah’s devotion reflects an Afrocentric mindset where family is at the center. She ignores Gabriel’s indiscretions for the betterment of her family. From the start, she knows of Gabriel’s lust for Esther—“I been knowing. . . ever since that evening, way back there, when Esther come to church” (148); she knows that Gabriel steals from her—“And you sent that girl away, didn’t you? With the money outen that box?” (147); and
she knows of Royal’s bloodline—“... if you’d wanted to own that poor boy, I wouldn’t nohow of cared what folks said [. . .] I’d have raised him like my own [. . .] and he might be living now” [emphasis mine] (148). Deborah’s reasoning evidently aligns with cultural practices that value family and community over individual infidelity. She privileges the family connection over society’s expectations of what she should do or feel. We see a similar African-centered mindset in August Wilson’s *Fences*.

Baldwin highlights another Grimes woman, Elizabeth, with similar family secrets and religious conflicts. The consequences of maintaining these silences, however, prove more devastating than Deborah’s. Elizabeth’s unstable family history ultimately leads her to someone who, by Christian standards, is unequally yoked, Richard. Prior to moving to New York, Elizabeth lived in the South with her “unfit” father who presumably ran a bootleg house or brothel—“For her father ran what her aunt called a ‘house’ [. . .] where wicked people often came” (155). Elizabeth was later raised by her aunt, whom she felt did not love her (156). Upon meeting Richard, to whom she grows immediately attracted, Elizabeth travels to New York with him, in search of a better life. While there, Elizabeth discovers that she is pregnant with Richard’s child and withholding this information from both her father and her aunt, for revealing it, the narrator suggests, would hurt them, particularly her father. Baldwin notes, “... she could not think how to tell him, how to bring such pain to him who had had such pain already” (154). Revealing it may

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10 Troy’s secret affair with Alberta results in a child, Raynell. Rose, Troy’s wife, agrees to care for the child as her own, even though her marriage is essentially over with Troy. Rose says, “I’ll take care of your baby for you... ‘cause...like you say...she’s innocent...and you can’t visit the sins of the father upon the child. A motherless child has got a hard time. [She takes the baby from him.] From right now... this child got a mother. But you a womanless man” (Wilson 1353). In this way, August Wilson revoices Baldwin’s characters, or signifies upon them, further demonstrating the ancestral connection. See what sources say about valuing community and family. See Act II, Scene 3.
further separate Elizabeth from her established family with Richard. Baldwin hints that Elizabeth’s aunt may have sent for her had she informed the family of her pregnancy.

Before Elizabeth can inform Richard of her pregnancy, he is arrested for a crime that he clearly does not commit. Unfortunately for Richard, the racism of the North mirrors that of the South. He soon discovers that as a black man in a white racist world, he has no voice; Elizabeth, a black woman in a patriarchal society has less power than Richard; and they, the white police officers, exert their authority. Baldwin demonstrates Richard’s and Elizabeth’s hopeless plight in the following scene: “But the next day when she saw him, she wept. He had been beaten, he whispered to her, and he could hardly walk [emphasis mine]. His body. . . bore almost no bruises, but was full of strange, painful swellings, and there was a welt above one eye” (172). Richard bears the proof that he has been degraded, dehumanized, and worst of all, emasculated. Babacar M’Baye suggests that Richard’s emasculation at the hands of the white officers may be the main reason that he gives up on life (172).

In the same way that Chinua Achebe’s Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart resists British colonialism by sealing his own fate via perceived self-destruction, so does Baldwin’s Richard. His liberty was more important to him than being held in a society that treated blackness as nothingness. He was also not a Christian (Baldwin 164). Despite release from jail, Richard commits suicide: “That night he cut his wrists with his razor” (176). Horace Porter argues that “Richard’s suicide represents a violent and tragic enactment of. . . racial resignation” (112). From an ancestral perspective, however, Richard’s suicide is reminiscent of the resistance demonstrated in the myth of flying Africans. As Jennifer Hildebrand states, “Freedom was essential to Africans of the Delta region, including the Igbos . . . kidnapping and enslaving an Igbo usually involved re-
moving him from his family and community; this meant more than the denial of the material
and personal pleasures associated with home. It meant a severing of the bond between him
and his ‘protecting spirit,’ generally believed to be the ancestral spirit of his father or grandfa-
th...” (142). This comparison is to assign Richard an Igbo descendancy, although Elizabeth
does describe him as possessing similar qualities that some enslavers noted, such as being “so
sullen” and “high strung” (Baldwin 158). She further mentions his affinity toward African art,
which signals a further link to his ancestors. Elizabeth notices how much African art feeds Rich-
ard’s soul:

She could not find, between herself and the African statuette. . .on which

[Richard] gazed with such melancholy wonder, any point of contact. . .she did
not know why he adored things that were so long dead; what sustenance they
gave him, what secrets he hoped to wrest from them. But she understood, at
least, that they did give him a kind of bitter nourishment, and that the secrets
they held for him were a matter of life and death. . .but she did not say any of
this. She only listened, and in her heart she prayed for him [emphasis mine].

(167)

Clearly, Richard does not cope with the oppression in the manner which Elizabeth, and
perhaps Western society, understands or deems appropriate. Instead, he creates his own desti-
nry in a world that had sought to do it for him. Understandably, Elizabeth feels somewhat re-
sponsible for Richard’s death, as her secret pregnancy holds a possible key to Richard’s survival.
Baldwin suggests that her secret pregnancy has the ability to keep Richard alive. Had she in-
formed him, perhaps Richard would have had something else to live for, a family of his own. Yet
Baldwin also hints that Elizabeth’s Christian sensibilities may also bind her to silence because of the shame an out-of-wedlock child would bring to her family. As the narrator notes, “. . . she had fallen so easily” (166). It is this secret pain that Elizabeth carries in her relationship with her future husband, Gabriel.

Baldwin presents Florence as one who violates the sanctity of the African-derived family. At the same time, he offers a critique of Pentecostal concepts that conflict with African spirituality. She grows up with Gabriel and their mother in the South. Florence’s mother teachers her that “the way to pray [is] to forget everything and everyone but Jesus. . . [emphasis mine]” (60). Ironically, Florence applies these Pentecostal concepts to her mother as well. Although her abandonment relates to her mother’s favoritism of Gabriel over her (67), Baldwin elucidates the biblical and societal gender constructs that also contribute to Florence’s decision to flee: “. . . since Gabriel was a man child, all else must be sacrificed. Her mother did not, indeed, think of it as sacrifice, but as logic: Florence was a girl, and would be married, and have children of her own, and all the duties of a woman; and this being so, her life in the cabin was the best possible preparation for her future life” (67). So, she defies societal expectations and heads north to New York in the same manner as Elizabeth.

Although Florence does not harbor any devastating secrets concerning herself, she withholds vital information that has the potential to free John from Gabriel’s discontent. For most of her life, Florence has known of Gabriel’s sinful, secret past via Deborah’s revealing letter. This letter has the ability to indict Gabriel for all his wrong doings, especially concerning his ill-treatment of John. Florence notes, “I been carrying this letter now . . . for more than thirty years. And I been wondering all that time if I’d ever talk to you about it” (216). Florence
threatens to reveal a secret that not only has the power to further sully Gabriel’s holy name, but also to disrupt his family structure, for Elizabeth knows nothing of his deceased, nameless child. It is this child that would give Elizabeth the ammunition she needs to ward off Gabriel’s attacks on her “nameless” son, John. Essentially, Florence criticizes Gabriel’s hypocrisy, telling him that she knows that John is not his because John is a good child. Gabriel’s biological son Roy, however, is not. Florence states, “‘What fruit I seen from you if it ain’t been just sin and sorrow and shame?’” (217). Thus, Florence gives Gabriel a chance to right his previous wrongs; she does not share Deborah’s expose on Gabriel because, despite her feelings about him, she is cognizant of the importance of the village, perhaps because she once abandoned it.

Finally, Baldwin presents his protagonist John as a hoarder of a secret sin: he possibly commits sexual immorality, and he secretly hates his father. Although not as devastating as some of his other family members’ sins, John’s sins weigh him down all the same. If revealed, they have the potential to bring shame to his deeply religious family, thus his apprehension to share them. Baldwin states that John “had sinned with his hands” while in the bathroom, watching some older boys gamble with the arches of their urine (11). From a Pentecostal perspective, John’s sin could be that he watched the lewd act and did nothing about it, or that he actively participated in it by watching. However, Baldwin clarifies that John enjoyed this voyeurism because he lapses into a fantasy about these “older, bigger, braver” boys (11). We may thus infer that John’s fantasizing, coupled with his sinning “with his hands” implies that the sin he commits is masturbation. This lone sexual act would be the type of “sin” that religious zealots, such as Gabriel, would deem “hard to forgive” (11). Dwight McBride suggests that this scene—

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11 Reminiscent of the sin of Ham.
ne symbolizes John’s “insurgent desire that ‘he would never dare to speak.’ The passage also points to how the parental and religious repression of childhood sexuality and the designation of masturbation as a sin do not forestall and perhaps even eroticize and proliferate the boy’s ‘transformation’ from compulsory heterosexuality into his sexual desire for ‘older, bigger’ boys” (129).

John’s sexual secrets are also linked to his relationship with his father, Gabriel. John hates Gabriel, not necessarily for the manner in which Gabriel treats him, but for the power that Gabriel has over him. Psychologically, John wants to emasculate Gabriel. As John lies on the threshing floor amidst his spiritual experience, we learn that one of John’s secret sins concerns his gazing upon his “father’s hideous nakedness” as he “scrub[s] his back” (199). From a biblical perspective, John’s looking at Gabriel’s penis, which was “secret, like sin, slimy, like the serpent, and heavy, like the rod” (199) alludes the Genesis story of Noah’s son, Ham, who also stared at Noah’s drunken nakedness and failed to cover him (9:22). Noah curses the descendants of Ham, as does John feel he should be cursed for looking on Gabriel and despising his penis. John exhibits an oedipal complex concerning Gabriel because after this event, John “hated his father and longed for the power to cut his [him] down” (199). With his father’s distance and biological disconnection, John has no true reflection of self. We may comprehend that his gazing on Gabriel’s nakedness as an unconscious attempt to find himself in Gabriel. Baldwin hints that if John knew of his past, his secret hatred of Gabriel may not have manifested. Yet Baldwin also suggests that Pentecostalism forbids such a revisitation of the sin involved in John’s conception and legacy. This information is ultimately kept from him.
Perhaps a more lucid illustration of John’s secret sexual sin concerns his interactions with Elisha, the church-going “good boy” whom John clearly reveres. Upon meeting Elisha, John is immediately intrigued by him: “John stared at Elisha all during the lesson, admiring the timbre of Elisha’s voice, much deeper and manlier than his own [. . .]” (6). Surreptitiously, John seems to not only have a sort of religious reverence for Elisha, but we learn that John’s feelings run deeper, perhaps unbeknownst to him. Evidence of this rests in the physical altercation between the two youths. That is, the wrestling scene may represent John’s inner struggle with sexual sin. Their “fight” seems an innocent altercation between two young boys; however, Baldwin’s coded language suggests otherwise. As James R. Giles asserts, the wrestling match is “written with an undeniable overtone of sexual attraction” (379). Anyone who has ever witnessed two men wrestling would understand that they place themselves in what some may consider awkward and compromising positions. Baldwin paints a similar picture with two impressionable boys, one who has yet to figure himself out. Concerning the fight, Baldwin writes, “John pushed and pounded against the shoulders and biceps of Elisha, and tried to thrust with his knees . . . John was filled with a determination not to be conquered . . . He kicked, pounded, twisted, pushed. . . John could not break it . . . the odor of Elisha’s sweat was hung in John’s nostrils . . . They both stared at each other, half grinning [italics mine]” (48). Not only does Pentecostalism shun such a suggestion, but through an African spiritual lens, the suggestion of same sex desire is frowned upon. O. R. Dathorne notes the following:

In parts of Africa, everything except the most formal aspects of mating is frowned upon. . . be it homosexuality, anal or oral sex, or even undue pleasure on the woman’s part. This attitude is also found among Blacks in the United States;
and although these are broad statements unsupported by the painstaking data of the sociologist, they are mentioned tentatively, because they show a link with Africa [emphasis mine]. (251)

Although there is no place in the novel that specifically states John’s struggle with his own sexuality or his desires for Elisha, the outcome of the altercation implies some need for John to seek repentance. Something happened to John. Soon after the boys wrestle, John “mounts” the pulpit—a holy place where only the righteous may stand (49). His standing in the pulpit suggests his desire to right some sort of wrong that occurred during his “fight” with Elisha. This wrestling match clearly shows the deeper implications of John’s struggles with physical and spiritual strength, but also with those unrecognized sexual desires, especially those that conflict with his religious beliefs. Obviously Elizabeth senses John’s struggles because in her own prayer and flashback, she symbolically rebirths John in a scene that Baldwin paints as spiritual labor. Elizabeth feels a “secret in her loins, down into the darkness, weeping and groaning and cursing God. How long she had bled, and sweated, and cried, no language on earth could tell. . . [emphasis mine]”(191). Just as a newborn would, John cries out; his tears are those of spiritual joy because he experiences his breakthrough, “invaded” and “possessed” with spiritual power that echoes the trances of those homeland transports. David Leeming substantiates this notion, stating that “[o]n the church floor [John confronts] the ‘anguish of his ancestors, and the price paid for him’” (89). More important, John finally receives the necessary support to make his ancestral connection because his immediate family and church family witnesses. Elizabeth J. West’s focus of the importance of community in guiding a member through conversion
further this reading (*African Spirituality* 16). Toni Morrison highlights the importance of John’s journey to spiritual selfhood in the presence of the village. She states,

There were spaces and places in which a single person could enter and behave as an individual within the context of the community. A small remnant of that you can see sometimes in Black churches where people shout. It is a very personal grief and a personal statement done among people you trust. Done within the context of the community, therefore safe. And while the shouter is performing some rite that is extremely subjective, the other people are performing as a community protecting that person. So you have a public and a private expression going on at the same time. To transfer that is not possible [emphasis mine]. (493)

Baldwin’s characters must somehow navigate between the public and the private, between the light and the dark, and between the community and the individual. Unlike Gabriel who falls due to his private salvation, John’s future, Baldwin suggests, may be more promising because he openly seeks the church’s support. Similar to Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* where the importance of the community elders publically “... reinforce for the uninitiated the fact that they depend on the wisdom of the ancestors for the maintenance of community harmony” (Anthonia C. Kalu 66), Baldwin shows that to withhold valuable information that would negatively affect the family or community ultimately disrupts the objective.

### 3.3 *The Color Purple*: Critical Reception and Overview

With its portrayal of the intricate conflicts within in black male and female relationships, *The Color Purple* (1982) is arguably Alice Walker’s most successful novel. In fact, Walker states
in “Writing The Color Purple” (1982) that she was well-aware of the need to write herself into history, as well as the rigidity some male critics may view it. She notes, “I also knew The Color Purple would be a historical novel, and thinking of this made me chuckle...a black male critic said he’d heard I might write a historical novel someday, and went on to say, in effect: Heaven protect us from it” (In Search 355-56). This implication suggests that some men may not seriously consider Walker’s work as historic because it was inspired by a conversation with her sister about “one woman asking another for her underwear” (356). Despite this and other sexist critiques, Walker’s novel went on to receive the 1983 Pulitzer Prize Award in fiction and sealed her legacy with the classic film adaptation of this novel.

Spanning the 1920s through the 1940s in a rural Georgia town, The Color Purple presents Walker’s emphasis on silenced black female voices at the hands of equally oppressed black men. To emphasize the silence, Walker incorporates the epistolary form to give her female characters a voice, as well as to indicate initial patriarchal mistreatment of them. In her collection of essays titled In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens (1983), Walker informs us of her commitment to examine the “oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women” who are, to her, “the most fascinating creatures in the world” (250-51). As a womanist, or black feminist, who is committed to “the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female” (xi), Walker also explores the societal ills that affect men. Barbara Christian posits that Walker’s texts are beneficial in both understanding and healing southern relationships: “She has long insisted that until the solids and prints of the South are sorted and stitched into clarity, the relationship in this country between men and women, blacks and whites will continue in disarray” (50). In her works, we become privy to both male and female
motivations, oppressions, and redemptions. In the treatment of her characters, Walker suggests that the black men who mistreat black women may do so because of the link between racism and sexism. What Walker ultimately interrogates in her works is the idea that black women’s voices are not considered valuable in a patriarchal society. From her background in rural Georgia, we may understand the root of her desire to shed light on this lack of consideration for the female voice.

Like many of her black female characters, Walker was silenced by the presence of the privileged male voice, more specifically that of her brothers. Walker shares that her brothers were absolved of any responsibility for mistakenly shooting her in the eye with a BB gun. Despite the trauma of ridicule she experiences from this incident, Walker’s brothers’ versions of the accident initially trump hers and they return to normalcy thereafter (Evelyn C. White 27). What is also noted is that Walker remains quiet because her brothers tell her to do so. Walker chronicles this traumatic episode in her essay titled “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self.” Walker writes of how society dictates her play alongside her brothers as a subordinate figure. Walker also notes the domination her older brothers impressed upon her to reinvent a version of what she states is her truth. Walker notes,

. . . holding my bow and arrow. . . I feel an incredible blow in my right eye. I look down just in time to see my brother lower his gun. My brothers rush to my side. My eye stings, and I cover it with my hands. ‘If you tell,’ they say, ‘we will get a whipping. You don’t want that to happen, do you?’ I do not. ‘Here is a piece of wire,’ says the older brother. . . ‘say you stepped on one end of it and the other flew up and hit you’. (In Search of Our Mothers Gardens 345)
Walker’s silence has at its core, not only an emphasis of an authoritative male voice, but also the desire to protect her brothers. This episode links Walker’s major female characters’ plights to hers. Her interest in the interconnectivity of racism and sexism, even within the black community, highlights the plot of *The Color Purple*.

Within the novel, Celie is as an oppressed, traumatized woman whose secret past demonstrates why she dislikes men and ultimately rejects conventional, patristic Christianity. In fact, Celie presents herself in this manner; she controls the story. Like Baldwin’s protagonist John, Celie is fourteen at the novel’s onset. At this age, Celie has birthed two children, after being raped by the man she knows as her father, Alphonso. Creating images of chattel slavery, Walker writes that Celie’s father sells her children before she can establish a bond with them. The narrator suggests that Alphonso wanted no proof of his transgressions. Celie’s mother goes insane and dies soon thereafter. The only person with whom Celie has a personal bond is her sister, Nettie. However, when Celie’s father marries her off to Mr. ____, an abusive man who has had three children from a previous marriage, the bond between Celie and Nettie is severed. Nettie is ousted after coming to visit Celie and rejecting Mr. ____’s unwelcomed, secret sexual advances and resisting his attempted rape. It is not until the appearance of Mr. ____’s lover, Shug, that Celie “sees” a woman with her own voice, one who is outgoing, sexually assertive, and independent. Although Celie sees glimpses of selfhood in Mr. ____’s sister Kate and in Harpo’s wife Sofia, Shug represents the icon that Celie wishes to emulate. Shug’s unconventional religious perceptions eventually assist Celie in gaining selfhood and establishing independence. Considering the influence of the black church on the characters’ actions, Walker demonstrates
the conflict with Western religious practices, which ultimately influences family/communal secrecy.

3.4 The Black Church: Christianity/African Christianity and Oppression

Within the black church exist ideals that have been adapted from African spirituality and Eurocentrism. Since the Middle Passage, African Americans have reinvented and transferred the emphases of their homeland communities to that of the black church. Made up of mostly Baptist and Methodist denominations (DuBois 216), the black church became and continues to be an integral part of African American experience. Within this context, African-derived peoples demonstrated their ability to not only maintain many of their inherited spiritual beliefs, but they also adapted them to fit the confines of a Western-influenced Christianity, which they in turn revised. As West notes, “Africans came to America with ways of understanding and experiencing the world. African American religious history does not begin with Christianity: It originates in the traditional African worldview that the slaves merged with European Christianity and transformed into AfroChristianity” (African Spirituality 20). Much like African spirituality, this African based Christianity is what many African Americans count on to guide their daily lives.

Despite the reinvention and adaptation of Christianity, the black church also echoes many of the societal ideals that render it, as a whole, contributive to the imbalance of power found within black relationships. In other words, it has either been unable or unwilling to separate those Eurocentric influences of sexism and racism from its practices. W.E.B DuBois writes, “Thus one can see in the Negro church to-day, reproduced in microcosm, all that great world from which the Negro is cut off by color prejudice and social condition” (217). West further
posits, that “. . . many black churches would adopt sexist practices of their white Christian counterparts, often excluding women . . .” (African Spirituality 13). Moreover, Westernized concepts of religion prove contradictory to the spiritual inclusiveness found within African spirituality. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ specify the complex ills particular to Western religions: “Western religion is not simply sexist but racist, imperialist, ethnocentric, and heterosexist as well. These distinct forms of oppression are not separate from or incidental to sexism, but are thoroughly interstructured with it as different aspects of a dualistic and hierarchal religious worldview” (2). Given these areas, we can better understand the conflict concerning secrecy that plagues the characters in The Color Purple.

3.5 The Color Purple: Secrecy, Trickery, and Christian Concepts

Walker uses both major and supporting characters to display how secrecy operates within the black community. For example, both Harpo and Sofia keep secrets. In fact, their relationship begins in secrecy and within the confines of the black church, which is where the foundation and reiteration of gender expectations are echoed. As societal expectations would have it, Harpo desires a family of his own because he initially wants someone whom he can control. This is confirmed when he asks Mr. ___ about his treatment of Celie. Just before Harpo seeks to begin his own family, he asks his father why he hits Celie: “Cause she my wife. Plus she stubborn. All women good for—. . .” (30). This example is significant in Harpo’s quest for family, especially because he is considered a weak man, even by the lowly Celie’s standards (35). To be considered male, he must leave the security of his father and establish his own household. Harpo must exert his position as a man and obtain a wife in order to seal and catapult his station as a dominant male figure.
However, Walker shows how one person’s actions can stain an entire family. Harpo’s quest for family is thwarted due to his deceased mother’s reputation. While still married to Mr. ___, Anna Julia not only participates in an affair with another man, she is murdered by him. This stigma on Harpo’s family makes them outsiders to those members of the community who view Anna Julia’s children unworthy of association. Further, from an Afro-centric perspective, her adultery and murder disrupts the morals of the African-based community. Olupona explains the need for members of the community to operate from an African-centered mindset: “African religions continue to be a source of social stability and cohesion in African communities, especially in the midst of rapid socioeconomic change” (xvii). Anna Julia's actions result in Harpo’s shame and that ridicule is transferred to him, rendering him unfit for Sofia.

As a result of this social stigma associated with Anna Julia, Sofia’s father disapproves of Harpo, which further makes it difficult for him to rise to manhood. To establish a family with Sofia, Harpo rationalizes that the best way for him to overcome the shame is to intentionally impregnate Sofia out of wedlock, thus solidifying his imminent family. Doing so links Harpo to the community with which he seeks affiliation. Evidence of Harpo’s desire to reinvent himself and establish a position as a viable community member is seen in a detailed conversation in which he reveals his secretive intentions to marry Sofia, despite paternal objections on both sides. Celie writes:

Harpo tell me all his love business now. His mind on Sofia Butler day and night. . .

Sometimes us can get away from her daddy. . . [he says.]

If she so smart how come she big? I ast.
Harpo shrug. She can’t git out the house no other way, he say. Mr. ___ won’t let us marry. Say I’m not good enough to come in his parlor. But if she big I got a right to be with her, good enough or no.

Where yall gon stay?

They got a big place, he say. When us marry I’ll be just like one of the family [emphasis mine]. (37)

Walker demonstrates that Harpo’s secret tactics and desire for family stem from the absence of a close-knit connection with his own mother. In Sofia, Harpo sees his way out of Mr. ___’s control.

Walker’s treatment of secrecy also positions Sofia as societal trickster figure. This revolutionary character defies conventional female roles of gentility and submission, controlling her relationship with Harpo, so much so that it is she who wears the pants. As Celie notes, “She wearing a pair of Harpo pants” (64). Sofia subverts society’s treatment of her as a black woman, including Harpo’s attempted mistreatment and misdirected authority. She does not allow him to dominate or abuse her. Instead, the combination of her physical and mental strength allows her to resist Harpo’s attacks. Celie writes,

They fighting like two mens. Every piece of furniture they got is turned over.

Every plate look like it broke. The looking glass hang crooked, the curtains torn.

The bed look like the stuffing pulled out. They don’t notice. They fight. He try to slap her. . . She reach down and grab a piece of stove wood and whack him cross the eyes. He punch her in the stomach, she double over groaning but come up with both hands lock right under his privates. He roll on the floor. He grab her
dress tail and pull. He jump up to put a hammer lock under her chin, she throw him over her back. He fall *bam* gainst the stove. (44)

Sofia’s resistance to male domination, as well as her preference for what society deems men’s work (63), showcases her as subversive figure, incapable of being classified solely by patriarchal standards or expectations.

Furthermore, Sofia withholds vital information from Harpo, news could jeopardize his manhood. In the same way that she subverts societal standards of womanhood, she under-mines him in the presence of others. After her return from jail, Sofia and Harpo rekindle their friendship, so much so that between Harpo, Squeak and her, they have established what we may deem a blended family. In a pivotal scene, Walker exposes Sofia as ultimate trickster, openly informing Harpo that he did not father all of their children:

I got six children by this crazy woman, he mutter.

Five, she say.

He so outdone he can’t even say, Say what? He look over at the youngest child

. . . he love her best of all. Her name Henrietta.

Henrietta, he say.

She say, Yesssss. . .like they say it on the radio.

Everything she say confuse him. Nothing, he say. Then he say,

Go git me a cool glass of water.

She don’t move.

Please, he say.
She go git the water, put it by his plate, give him a peck on the cheek.

Say, Poor Daddy. Sit back down. (182)

Although shocking for Harpo, Walker suggests that Sofia’s secret does little to divide the extended and blended family, perhaps because Harpo desires to keep his unit intact. Further, he is hit with yet another secret, only this time from Mary Agnes who reveals her intentions to leave with Shug and Celie: “I’m going North” to sing (183). Should Mary Agnes depart, that would leave Harpo with no woman with which to seal his masculinity; therefore, he comes to depend on Sofia for family connection and stability.

Additionally, Walker reveals via Mary Agnes the female need to voice women’s collective pain. Mary Agnes’s desire to sing, or to create, may stem from the oppression and violation she endures, specifically her rape by her white uncle, the prison warden. Tapped by the group to manipulate her white uncle into releasing Sofia from imprisonment, Mary Agnes’s need to sing manifests shortly after her rape (96). Singing, then, may be her way of speaking and of coping with her pain, particularly since she could hardly verbalize the experience upon her return (95). Toinette Eugene agrees with this interpretation, stating that singing may be “the legitimate collective expression of the suffering experience by Black women in America. It is this articulation of suffering through music and speech which seems to have a major therapeutic function within the womanist and larger Black community” (61). Mary Agnes’ sacrifice for Sofia’s freedom demonstrates that, although she domestically partners with Harpo, she still stands in support of Sofia for the betterment of the community. In turn, Sofia’s public revelation of Henrietta’s paternity supports Mary Agnes’ decision to depart for Memphis. In other words, a Westernized expectation of the two women suggests that they should be at odds. From an Af-
rocentric perspective, their mutual support of each other shows a collective understanding and sympathy for female pain. This type of mutual support may serve as an affirmation of the collective Africanity imbedded within the African American psyche (West, *African Spirituality* 30).

Phyllis M. Belt-Beyan echoes the importance of African American family units, noting that many African Americans will go through great lengths to keep their families intact, even resorting to trickery, as did their ancestors. Drawing on West African folklore and the trickster figures that permeated various cultures, some African Americans may invoke the spirit of Esu to remain connected to the community: “Driven to experience their intellectual freedoms as well as their natural rights to maintain lasting relationships and educate their children, the families used the same wit as cunning and timeless as any learned from their West African brother, Anansi the quintessential Everyman and trickster. . . More often, they succeeded in secret. . . [emphasis mine]” (41).

Walker echoes Beyan’s sentiment, as well as Henry Lewis Gates, Jr.’s points about Esu; she also infuses the trickster figure in Shug. Her presence thwarts Mr. _____’s power, as she discovers the secret letters he had been hiding from Celie. Shug manipulates Mr. _____ and eventually reveals the stash of Nettie’s letters, supporting the cunning involved in ensuring the resolution of a once-severed familial connection: “All of a sudden Shug buddy-buddy again with Mr. _____. They sit on the steps, go down Harpo’s. Walk to the mailbox. [. . .] Saturday morning Shug put Nettie letters in my lap. . . He been keeping your letters, say Shug. [. . .] He walk round with it in his coat all day. He never mention it [emphasis mine]” (114). We should question Mr. _____’s motives for hiding the letters from Celie. Is it because, as Celie states, he is evil? Is it to maintain his power or to reinforce his constant control? Is it because he recognized the
strength in Celie and Nettie’s relationship? The novel suggests that all of these inquiries are plausible. Perhaps, Mr. ____ is equally ashamed of his actions, coupled with the length of time he holds the letters, as well as the freeing information they hold. We may further surmise that he hides the letters for his own family stability.

Similar to Johnson’s early revelation of his secret and of Larsen’s emphasis on heritage in her epigraph, Walker reveals her novel’s major premise in the first sentence of first page. She sets the tone for secrecy and suggests a reason to keep family secrets—protection. Celie’s “father” warns, “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (11). Thus with Alphonso’s statement for Celie to remain mum about his raping her and fathering her two children, Walker establishes the mood early on that remaining silent will keep the family intact. Perhaps, Alphonso recognizes Celie’s need to free herself of the burden of this trauma, for he offers her an out by warning her that God should be the sole recipient such news. Thus, to testify to a spiritual entity provides an escape for Celie and secures Alphonso’s position as patriarch within their immediate family, for his indiscretions will remain hidden from the community at large. As a result of his admonition, Celie initially testifies or “tells it” only to a Christian God because her fourteen year-old mind reasons is safe. Charlotte Pierce-Baker states that black females are encouraged to remain silent about rape and cope in secrecy. . . ‘There is an uncanny silence surround the trauma of black rape. I believe I understand the silence of black women who survived. I am a black woman wounded, and because I kept silent for so long, my newly found voice is still emerging. Silences have be-
come important to me. I’m not sure why I refused to tell. But I do know I was intensely afraid of the truth in all its manifestations’. (qtd. in hooks 28)

Yet, we can also understand that Celie’s silence also keeps her closely acquainted with her what’s left of her communal connection.

Walker further suggests an explanation for such secrets: family security. Although Alphonso later reveals to his new young wife that he had taken in two children who were not his, he does not tell Celie or Nettie that he is not their biological father. Instead, Walker offers a surface reason for Alphonso’s intentions on remaining silent. He wanted to protect them: “Your daddy didn’t know how to git along, he say. White folks lynch him. Too sad a story to tell pitiful little growing girls, he say. Any man would have done what I done” (166-67). We later discover Alphonso’s monetary motive for withholding their pasts. They would legitimately be the rightful owners of their parents’ property and business. Although we may imagine that Celie is perhaps grateful for this discovery because it frees her a bit from the shame of incest, it still pains her that as a black woman, she initially seems helpless regarding this withheld information that for most of her life had shaped and destroyed her family unit. With no grave markers for her deceased parents and with her only sister in Africa, Celie comes to rely on Shug as a member of her extended family: “Shug say, Us each other’s peoples now and kiss me” (167).

Once Celie discovers the secrets of her family’s past and realigns her communal connections with women, specifically with Shug, she temporarily stops writing to God. Instead, she addresses her letters to Nettie because at this stage, all men had brought her too much pain, including a Christian, male God. Since her father’s early foundational warning, Celie feels be-
trayed even by God, the only entity with whom she could tell her innermost thoughts and se-
crets: “. . . he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I
probably won’t ever see again [. . .] the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just
like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful [sic], and lowdown” (175). This conflict with re-
ligion contributes to her silence about her rape. West notes Celie’s conflict with a religion that
fails to not only consider women, but also one that does not connect to African spirituality,
which incorporates nature in its divinities: “This concept of spirit is not singular to African
thought, but it contrasts western Christianity which does not recognize spirit as present in all
entities, particularly inanimate objects” (African Spirituality 1). Since Celie’s indoctrinated in
Western concepts of Christianity via the black church, she equates honoring them by protecting
them from the shame that her incest would bring. Therefore, Celie’s eventual recognition of
God as inclusive of the natural aspects associated with her ancestral past contributes to her
mental, physical, societal, and spiritual freedom.

Ultimately, Shug’s guidance assists Celie in embracing her various epiphanies, including
those concerning identity, sexuality, or spirituality. As West states, “In traditional African socie-
ties women who serve as spiritual leaders often find their gift an eventual source of independ-
ence: this is exemplified among the Olokun of West Africa whose priestesses tend to leave their
husbands’ houses and establish their own living quarters. . . ” (African Spirituality 19). We see
this clearly in Shug; she operates as Celie’s spiritual leader and is the impetus behind her free-
dom. Like the Olokun priestesses of West Africa (West 19), Celie abandons Mr. ___’s home un-
der the direction of Shug. By leaving with Shug for Memphis, Celie receives her “gift” of inde-
pendence from patriarchal control at the hands of Mr. ___. Once she gets “man off [her] eye-
ball” (*The Color Purple* 179), Celie eventually discovers her worth and identity as a complex woman, who like her female predecessors Wilson and Keckley, can re-create her own identity, as well as integrate an all-inclusive religious concept. Once the secrets are revealed, Celie eventually heals, reuniting with her biological family and coming to a truer sense of self.

Walker’s narrative strategy of the epistolary form situates the novel to demonstrate the revelation of secrets. We learn that the silences that haunt Celie are revealed through Nettie’s letters, which ultimately serve as Celie’s introduction and revisitation to the past events that have controlled her life. Celie discovers that not only is Nettie alive, she is prospering and revealing to her a world outside of the only one she knows: Africa is beautiful and complex, her children are alive and well, and perhaps most important and freeing—the man who sexually abused her for years and for whom she bears two children is not her biological father. Nettie notes, “But Celie, I can tell you. And I pray with all my heart that you will get this letter, if none of the others. Pa is not our pa!” (162). Since the novel begins with Celie’s history as an abused child whose identity is attached to this secret family shame, it is imperative that she knows this information. Once she reads Nettie’s letters, along with observations from her extended family/community, Celie learns how to fight for herself and love herself. Shug’s revelations about God influence Celie’s perceptions of God. After she reconciles these ideals, Celie can create, love, and reject male dominance, if she desires, by separating herself from the equation. Her exclusion from the setting that oppresses her, her flight, subverts the male intent to control her body, mind, and spirit. Celie demonstrates that movement from the oppression requires physical movement and support from the empowered female presence that comes in various forms, from Sofia, Mary Agnes, Nettie, and Shug.
With *The Color Purple*, Walker highlights the African Americans’ proclivity to not only resort to extreme measures to keep their family units stable, they may also (knowingly or unknowingly) incorporate ancestral transports to do so, including secrecy and silences. She also shows that Western religious concepts clash with some of the characters’ African-centered mindsets, especially Shug’s and Celie’s. Walker’s portrayal of the Celie’s coming to terms with these concepts demonstrates the power that lies within the female voice, once freed from the chains of patriarchy, even if disguised within the society’s religious beliefs.
4 SEXUAL SECRECY AND SUBVERSION IN GAYL JONES’S CORREGIDORA AND LALITA TADEMY’S CANE RIVER

Gayl Jones writes in Corregidora (1975), “‘There’s some things them people just won’t let be our business no matter how hard we try’” (144). In this quote by the white police officer, John Willie, “them people” refers to black people and reiterates the propensity for secrecy in African American culture and literature. There are numerous instances of pre-Middle Passage transports in works by black women, especially in novels centered on the lasting effects of chattel slavery. In their works, black women include survived practices particular to African-derived cultures, such as orality, spirituality, and family. These maintained elements may have obvious connections when we consider African American literature and culture. Less obvious, perhaps, is the integration of secrecy throughout many of these works, specifically, sexual secrecy and subversion of power structures. Jones is one of many who questions sexual silence, particularly secrecy surrounding women in oppressive circumstances.

Contemporary writers also continue their literary foremothers’ traditions by examining the legacy of slavery and its effects on black and multiracial women Lalita Tademy’s Cane River (2001) revoices Jones’s female characters who memorize and retell the stories of their salacious heritage during slavery. As Jones’s protagonist Ursa states, “‘My great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmama didn’t live through and my grandmama told my mama what they both lived through and we were supposed to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we’d never forget. Even though they’d burned everything to play like it never happen. . .’” (9). This illustration demonstrates Jones’s emphasis on orality and the necessity of the ancestral presence in remembering.
Similar to Jones, Tademy’s work also signals the importance of honoring the ancestors. *Cane River* depicts the cultural ties specific to one’s ancestral home. She also reiterates genealogical significance and recognizes literary ancestors to whom she is indebted. For instance, Tademy draws on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* to demonstrate the spiritual return of dissatisfied ancestors who force their descendants into remembering them.\(^{12}\) For its historicized treatment of enslaved multiracial peoples in the United States, *Cane River* also revoices William Wells Brown’s *Clotel, or the President’s Daughter* (1853), Frances E.W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1893), Pauline E. Hopkins’ *Contending Forces* (1900), and Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966).

With *Cane River*, Tademy showcases the trials associated with her multiracial heritage, including the lack of recognition along blurred constructs of race. Stephanie Bird’s *Light, Bright and Damned Near White: Biracial and Triracial Culture in America* (2009) considers these unclear lines, categorical omissions, and racial complexities particular to multiracial individuals in the United States. Because of the benefits associated with whiteness (and therefore rightness), identity detection became instrumental in distinguishing black from white. However, multiracial people experienced a different type of navigation. Bird states, “This history shows that triracial and biracial people have been invisible amidst their heightened visibility that played havoc with their psyche” (x). Tademy seeks this type of recognition for her ancestors in *Cane River*.

\(^{12}\) See Linda Krumholz’s “The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.” She concludes that “Beloved is Sethe’s ‘ghost,’ the return of her repressed past,” forcing Sethe “to confront the gap between her motherlove and the realities of motherhood in slavery” (400).
4.1 *Cane River*: Historical Fiction and Complex Creole Culture

*Cane River* presents a fictional testament of Tademy’s secretive family’s history. Set near Cane River in central Louisiana and spanning the early 1800s and 1900s, *Cane River* chronicles three generations of Tademy’s maternal ancestors. Unlike Jones’s Ursa, who is privy to the histories of her ancestors’ sexual ownership by the Portuguese seaman Corregidora, Tademy is not as fortunate. Tademy has some knowledge of her great-grandmother, Emily. However, most of Tademy’s ancestral history focuses on her family’s recollections of Emily’s beauty, former slave status, light skin, and open relationship (*plaqage*) with a Frenchman, Joseph Billes. For Tademy, Emily serves as the key to unveiling her family’s past.

Haunted by what she calls an inexplicable desire to do something other than her corporate job, Tademy resigned from her lucrative position and began researching her family history. She explains, “I found myself secretly thinking about Emily, who she was, how she came to be. . .In 1995, *driven by a hunger that I could not name*, I surprised myself and quit my job. . .I interviewed family members and local historians, learning just how tangled the roots of family trees could become [emphasis mine]” (xi). This inexplicable desire and hunger may be what John S. Mbiti refers to as the ancestor’s desire to be recognized by name. In *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969), Mbiti states that for the deceased individual, “. . . recognition by name is extremely important [emphasis mine]” (25). Tademy’s ancestors, then, spiritually tap her to recognize their legacies.

Tademy’s tangled roots transport her back to her diasporic homeland; that is, Cane River. Tademy focuses on the free/enslaved, white/black, and Creoles/Creoles of color comprising the complex community Cane River. Her research reveals that within this melting pot, diverse
groups “coexisted” amidst classism, ethnocentrism, and sexism. It is a picture of what is often called Creole. Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson explains Creole diversity in a study of multiracial individuals titled “People of Color in Louisiana” (1916). She writes,

Sifting down the mass of conflicting definitions, it appears that to a Caucasian, a Creole is a native of the lower parishes of Louisiana, in whose veins some traces of Spanish, West Indian or French blood runs. The Caucasian will shudder with horror at the idea of including a person of color in the definition, and the person of color will retort with his definition that a Creole is a native of Louisiana, in whose blood runs mixed strains of everything un-American, with the African strain slightly apparent. The true Creole is like the famous gumbo of the state, a little bit of everything, making a whole, delightfully flavored, quite distinctive, and wholly unique. (8-9)

This multiplicity of Creole populations produces diverse opportunities based on perceived majority racial makeup. Thus, there are greater opportunities for those who resemble stereotypical whiteness.

However, we must also understand that ethnic diversity does not originate with Creoles or that this diversity is particular only to the disbursement of African captives throughout the New World. Bird posits that various ethnic groups coexisted and procreated long before Antebellum miscegenation throughout the United States. She states the following:

Native Americans watched the pale-faced strangers clear and cut their forests, build fortresses, and plant crops. . . . [T]o survive, the tiny settlement also needed women and a reliable supply of cheap labor. Yet over a decade passed
before the first white women disembarked at Jamestown. Closer to the arrival of the men, in the same year, in fact the first shipments of Africans arrived as well.

Therefore, it should not be surprising that Creoles in Louisiana continued the traditions of their European settlers.

Cane River received its notoriety in the early 1800s and distinguished itself from surrounding communities as an “. . . isolated, close-knit, and hierarchal society. . . that stretched nineteen miles along a river in central Louisiana where Creole French planters, free people of color, and slaves coexisted in convoluted and sometimes nonstereotypical ways. . .” (xii).

Tademy’s extensive ancestral research results in her publication of Cane River. Upon discovering her ancestors and their intricate histories with white Creole men, Tademy vows to honor their legacies and names in print. She writes, “[My mind would drift to Emily’s mother, Philomene, about whom I knew so little, only a name in a brief two-page family history written twenty years before. . . . I began to develop a nagging and unmanageable itch to identify Philomene’s mother [emphasis mine]” (xi). Tademy’s uncontrollable desire to uncover her family’s legacy may have been her own Beloved, that ancestral presence seeking recognition and validation to be named, identified, and remembered. According to Barbara Christian’s “Fixing Methodologies: Beloved,” if ancestors are not properly fed, they have a tendency to return, seeking understanding or searching for a resolution the ‘conflict’” (366). Tademy writes of a similar experience, which led to her decision to ensure her family’s legacy. She writes, “It was then that I resolved I would not allow Suzette or her family to be lost from my memory again” (xiv). Tademy’s emphasis on memory further aligns with Jones’s ancestral recollections.
Tademy’s determination to historicize her ancestors provides them with a type of recognition that does not depict all slave women as the stereotyped representations of mam-mies, maids, or Jezebels\(^\text{13}\) (xiv). Tademy discovers that her multicultural, maternal ancestors were as susceptible to sexual violation as other female slaves. Similar to Ursa’s maternal ancestors, Philomene’s spirit charges Tademy to reveal her family’s history. Parallel to written textual histories such as Baldwin’s Florence and Walker’s Celie, Tademy moves beyond oral tradition to historicize her ancestors via the written word. Using her cousin’s fragmented letter as the im-petus to research her family legacy, Tademy turns her own family tree into historical fiction.

Both Tademy and *Cane River* are imperative to the study of secrecy because she best demonstrates the on-going link within the categories of identity, family, and sexual secrecy. Furthermore, *Cane River* continues the chattel slavery dialogue via the ancestor’s descendant. Besides book reviews and excerpts, there are little-to-no critical studies of Tademy’s text. Her follow-up novel *Red River* (2008) and reaching reader numbers and interest that even garnered national recognition via Oprah’s Book Club and other media platforms, Tademy’s *Cane River* warrants serious critical study. Moreover as a twentieth-century African American text that re-voices, Jones’s *Corregidora*, Tademy’s novel is central to literary histories of African American tradition. It provides a current, biographical treatment of secrecy that not only encompasses sexual secrecy and subversions, but also identity and family. Finally, Tademy’s work revoices the generational, multicultural, and power dynamics displayed in Jones’s novel. These women’s works connect in other ways as well. Both *Corregidora* and *Cane River* demonstrate sexual se-

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\(^{13}\) Patricia Hill Collins writes of these types of stereotypical images of black womanhood in “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images” in *Black Feminist Thought*. See p. 69-96.
crecy as subversion to patriarchal oppression. To better see these connections, we must first consider the slave legacy and historic backdrop against which they write.

4.2 Oppression, the Erotic, and Resistance

Since their arrival throughout the American diaspora, black people have relied on transported cultural practices to assist in their New World survival. The chattel slave system presented black women with new identities and familial challenges. The very ideas of individuality, family, and ownership of self within slave-holding societies conflicted with the institution that sought to divide, conquer, and destroy. Ordinarily, enslaved women could not wholeheartedly nurture and rear their children because they lacked ownership of themselves as well as their children. Enslaved children could not truly function as innocent, frolicking youths because they were forced into roles traditionally reserved for adults. Hazel Carby further iterates that enslaved men could not function as protectors, guides, and providers because they were mere chattel (5). Many did not know if they would be punished for a slightest indiscretion or witness brutal attacks or acts that violated their loved ones. Thus, the threat of slavery, including all of its unspeakable physical and mental degradations, served as an ultimate haunting barrier for people of color throughout the diaspora. Black women were especially privy to threats of sexual exploitation and violation from both men and women. Many black women who suffered from sexual assaults by white men also birthed the evidence of these violations. These children possessed the potential to disarm racial oppression and disrupt privileges based solely on race. According to Nancy Boyd-Franklin, “The rape and sexual exploitation of African American women by slave masters produced a large number of light-skinned babies. These children were valued
more highly by their white fathers and were often given certain privileges” (333). Within this context, many black women writers exposed the seccresies slavery sought to erase.

As previous chapters mention, Leslie Lewis argues that chattel slavery provides a reason for secrecy within nineteenth century African American narratives. She sees the master/slave relationship as formative in the continuation of secrecy. Lewis states, “Secrets are at the heart of African American narrative literature and are a legacy of slavery. The institution of slavery itself engendered secrets because it created a group of people (masters) who could forbid another group of people (slaves) to share certain kinds of information” (5). While her argument has merit, Lewis fails to consider the spiritual implications of secrecy maintained by African-descended people. Georganne Bess Montgomery identifies a similar problem as she researched the sparse scholarship that failed to consider African spiritualities in the criticism of African novels. She notes, “I realized then that perhaps there is a lack of literary criticism because many scholars pay little attention to the spirituality embedded in those texts because their approach to, definition of, and paradigm for spirituality is Western oriented” (3). Although Lewis’s work makes some valid claims concerning secrecy, it leads to the realization that there is more to consider outside of the master/slave relationship. When reading African-derived texts, we must regard the spiritual ties to sexual secrecy and subversion as neither abstruse nor far-fetched.

To aid in the reading of African American texts for sexual secrecy and subversion, I consider feminist poet, essayist, and “autobiomythographer” Audre Lorde. In her essay titled “Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power” (1989), Lorde contends that the erotic is a source of female power, embedded in women as energy and used to generate change. Similar to Eurocentric
perspectives that omit considerations of African spiritual transports, Lorde interrogates male-centered ideologies that charge women, particularly black women, to suppress their power and to perceive such power as worthless. As a result of this lack of recognition and of a devaluation of erotic power, women become oppressed by the very societies which instruct them to dismiss and to undermine this inherent influence.

Although Lorde’s concept is often misconstrued as merely sexual, “relegated to the bedroom alone” (57), the erotic encompasses more than a sexual act. Lorde describes the erotic as a “nurturer or nursemaid of all [women’s] deepest knowledge,” recognized in any experience that feels right or that satisfies (56). Most notably and pertinent to pre-Middle Passage transports, the erotic may be used as a tool of resistance. Accordingly, women must recognize and use the erotic as a powerful means to tap into their creativity. Women must not receive the erotic in fear because it “. . . is a resource within each [woman] that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of [their] unexpressed and unrecognized feeling [emphasis mine]” (53).

Within this context of secrecy and sexual subversion, Lorde’s position aligns female spirituality with African spirituality. According to Farah Jasmine Griffin, since Lorde’s theory precedes many feminists’ perceptions of female erotic power and resistance (526), a cultural tie with her African spirituality may explain the erotic’s resistive nature. For African-derived women, Griffin’s point is relevant, particularly for those in clearly defined oppressive situations such as chattel enslavement. The erotic points towards the Afro-spiritual connection maintained within the African psyche. If we recall Henry Louis Gates’ description of Esu’s collective qualities, more specifically, this trickster figure’s sexual mediations (6), then this link is certainly
plausible. Furthermore, Gates’ position of the trickster topos as maintained in diaspnic areas, “even today,” bolsters this notion (4). Thus, combined with secrecy as an African transport, we see the erotic’s duplicitous nature as an essential tool of female resistance.

4.3 Corregidora: Ancestral Assistance and the Erotic as Subversion

The emphasis on testifying about the tabooed sexual secrets that produced generations makes Jones’s text essential to this study. In Corregidora, Jones demonstrates the erotic’s generational movement and subversive authority. Once Ursa’s maternal ancestors achieve the fullness of the power of the erotic, they “aspire” (Lorde 54). Within this context, Great Gram rises above her Portuguese slave owner, Corregidora, and Ursa, a blues singer, finds her own identity outside of the context of her maternal ancestors’ perceived shameful history with the procurer.

Throughout Corregidora, Jones reveals the necessity of ancestral assistance in recognizing the erotic. At an early age, Ursa learns of Great Gram’s history and her sexual exploitation by Corregidora. Jones writes that Corregidora’s wife participated in Great Gram’s abuse as well. As Ursa’s grandmother, Gram, testifies, “‘And you know sometimes the mistresses was doing it too so they could have little pocket money that their husbands didn’t know about’” (23). Lynette Myles substantiates this practice, noting that “African American women have suffered from both male and female abuse” (27). From her ancestors, Ursa learns that Great Gram is Corregidora’s favorite gift, or piece of property. With Great Gram, Corregidora “makes generations” of Corregidora women (10); he fathers his own daughter, Gram, and procreates with Gram as well. For Ursa’s legacy, this family knowledge was to be passed on so that evidence of Corregidora’s crimes would be witnessed by all who beheld the multiracial offspring both Great Gram and Gram would produce. Ursa further learns that Great Gram is Corregidora’s “‘gold
piece” (10), his best prostituted slave whom he reveres and desires more than any other for her coffee bean complexion. Jones suggests that Corregidora equates Great Gram’s skin tone with her sexual prowess, which based on Lorde’s description, we will recognize as an aspect of the erotic. This erotic recognition proves essential to family ties.

Because of the ancestral presence, Ursa finally experiences her own erotic power. Lorde distinguishes the erotic from the pornographic because of the erotic’s connection to feelings (54). Great Gram’s eventual power over Corregidora may be seen as her connection to the erotic. As Ursa recounts Gram’s history with Corregidora, Gram recalls the mystery surrounding Great Gram’s flight from Corregidora. Gram states, “‘She never would tell me what she did. Up till this day she still won’t tell me what it was she did’” (172). The “it” as Ursa later realizes is the secretive power of the erotic. Jones situates Great Gram and Gram as integral ancestral guides, preparing Ursa to recognize her own erotic energy. Subverting the silence surrounding slavery, Ursa’s ancestors function as griottes, or female griots, simultaneously telling their histories and revealing to Ursa what Corregidora and Brazilian cultures attempt to hide by burning the evidence (9). Ashraf Rushdy confirms this omission of Brazilian’s sexual exploitation of black women. He writes, “In Brazil, in particular, slave women were subject to the sexualized commodification of their bodies. . . slave masters in Brazil prostituted slave women. While the prostitution of ‘slave women as a source of income is virtually unknown in the history of slavery in the United States,’ Brazilians time and again reported the practice. . .” (281). Myers confirms the general control slave owners sought, noting “. . . the slave master tries to have complete control over the black female body—her womb and her vagina” (24). Similar references apply to the
Corregidora women, including Ursa. Instead of the slave owner’s control, Ursa’s body is controlled by her two ex-husbands, Mutt and Tadpole.

Because of the abuse she has suffered at the hands of men, Ursa fails to recognize her spiritual power. The link to eventual healing and to her power begins once she learns the history of her mother’s relationship with her father. This missing information proves crucial to Ursa’s recognition of her erotic power, particularly since an inebriated Mutt throws her down the stairs, jealous of men’s gazes while she sings the blues (3). As a result of this violent act against her, Ursa can no longer perform her task as a Corregidora woman or, as her name suggests, make a judgment by bearing witness. Ursa cannot execute what her maternal ancestors have charged her to do; that is, to bear biological witnesses against the sexual secrecy that permeates slave-holding societies.

In addition to her great-grandmother’s uncensored history lessons of forced sexual interactions with Corregidora, Ursa also discovers her own identity via her mother’s history lesson about her father. Toward the novel’s end, Ursa experiences an epiphany, discovering that the cause of her disconnected emotions relate to her ancestors’ silence about her father’s absence. Jones suggests this male omission during Ursa’s formative years not only contributes to her inability to feel, it solely identifies her as a Corregidora descendant. In a conversation with Mutt, Ursa remembers,

‘Still there was what they never spoke, Mutt, what even they wouldn’t tell me.

How all but one of them had the same lover? Did they begrudge her [Ursa’s

14 Grottfried cites Melvin Dixon’s etymology of Ursa Corregidora: “… corregidore means ‘judicial magistrate’ in Portuguese (239). Additionally, Ursa in Latin means ‘bear,’ a word whose associative meaning is undeniable here” (560).
mother] for that? Was that their resentment? There was something, Mutt. They squeezed Corregidora into me, and I sung back in return. I would have rather sung her memory if I’d had to sing any. What about my own?’ (103)

Here, Jones implies the potential risks involved in politically charged collective experiences. Based on her interpretations from her ancestors’ admonitions, Ursa compartmentalizes her identity as a Corregidora woman. Tasked with revealing the oppressive sexual secrets of her ancestral past, Ursa becomes just as much of a commodified body as Great Gram and Gram. Amy Grottfried implies Ursa’s ancestors’ agenda to continue to expose Corregidora. Similar to Meyers, Grottfried writes, “Caught up in her mothers’ political agenda, Ursa initially allows Mutt to own her body and soul; according to Corregidora rules, a woman is wholly defined by her vagina and her womb” (560). That is, Ursa’s ancestors’ charge results in her becoming a commodity as well.

Thus, Jones reveals Ursa’s need for the erotic’s transformative power. Ursa’s ancestors’ emotional detachments caused by sexual exploitation and enslavement become Ursa’s. The physical manifestation of Ursa’s inability to make generations of Corregidora women comes in the form of her emergency hysterectomy. With her reproductive death, Ursa ties her sexual desire to her inability to procreate. Jones suggests that once Ursa’s traumatized body no longer possesses a reproductive option, Ursa disconnects emotionally from her erotic power. Jones writes of Ursa’s failure to connect with her second husband Tadpole: “I was struggling against him, trying to feel what I wasn’t feeling [emphasis mine]” (75). Jones makes Ursa’s resistance evident, suggesting a critique on patristic ideology about female fertility and sexual desire. With Ursa, Jones debunks the objectification of female bodies as having value based solely on their
reproductive capabilities. This notion is revealed as Ursa reconciles her erotic energy with her ancestry.

Although Ursa’s infertility thwarts the Corregidora legacy and temporarily distances her from her spiritual ancestors’ charge to reproduce evidence, it proves significant to her erotic epiphany. In the novel’s final pages, Jones reveals the link between Ursa’s and Great Gram’s erotic powers. Channeling her great-grandmother’s spirit, Ursa reenters the erotic realm as a transient woman. Ursa does something to Mutt that, according to him, she’d never done before; she performs fellatio (184). This erotic oral act signifies the oral tradition Ursa’s ancestors used to reveal their oppressive pasts. Prior to this scene, Jones details Ursa’s assessment of what Great Gram had done to Corregidora to make him both hate and miss her. This sexual secret reveals the spiritual transfer of an erotic ethos from Great Gram to Ursa. This philosophy allows Ursa to revise her own identity. As Myles notes, transient women “gather personal resources through a spiritual connection with women like themselves” (33). In her novel, Jones recreates this image of the transient woman via Ursa’s spiritual transfer. Ursa states, “I didn’t know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora—like Mama when she started talking like Great Gram” (184). Jones situates both Ursa and Great Gram as tricksters, subverting the male authority that sought to marginalize them.

Ursa draws on Great Gram’s erotic resistance to Corregidora and channels her own subversive energy to Mutt. She rationalizes, “It had to be sexual. . . it had to be something sexual that Great Gram did to Corregidora. I knew it had to be sexual. . . In a split second of hate and

15 I use erotic epiphany here to distinguish my position from Grottfried’s, who contends that Ursa’s healing derives from sexual recognition (561).
16 Myles’s concept of the “Transient Woman” explains African American women’s movements from marginalized to locations where they can grow and develop spiritually (33).
love I knew what it was. . . A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness that stops just before sexlessness, a moment that stops before it breaks the skin: ‘I could kill you’ [emphasis mine]” (184). With her erotic discourse, Ursa evolves from victim to victor, from object to subject because her oral act, sexual and verbal, signals the site of her resistance (Rushdy 282). The same way her ancestors’ mouths influenced Ursa’s thoughts, so too does Ursa’s mouth control Mutt’s life. Ursa’s authority over Mutt undermines his previous position as oppressive figure.

Biologically, Ursa cannot continue to challenge the sexual secrets within slavery. Instead, she decides to subvert the marginalization of black women by recognizing her transported powers, African-derived and female-derived, to revise her identity as a Corregidora woman. As she tells her mother, “. . . I wasn’t no Corregidora” (147). With Mutt, Ursa does not choose what Great Gram advises or what Rushdy states—“resistance or submission” (282). Instead, Ursa uses her erotic power, her creative energy to do both—to resist and to submit, to ride “two humps on the same camel” (Corregidora 102). In other words, Ursa creates her own exit, subverting the oppressive holds which society demands. Grottfried validates Ursa’s choices, stating that Ursa “does not castrate Mutt. The point is that she could have done so” (566).

Although Ursa deems her act sexual, it aligns more with her erotic power because it places Mutt at the mercy of her authority and leads to a suggested change. It further situates Ursa as aggressive, “active agent” whose self-empowerment leads to reclamation of self (Grottfried 566). Griffin also addresses this notion of black women being in touch with the erotic and using it to help keep them powerful in a perceived powerless situation. She notes, “[A] sexual act is a ritual that provides black women with a spiritual center that helps sustain them
through violence and abuse. . .” (532). Instead of using sex to satisfy carnal desires, Ursa uses it to communicate with her erotic energy to heal her victimized self. Jones highlights this point as Mutt and Ursa poignantly confess their previously unspoken emotional desires, as well as their fears of emotional pain: “‘I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.’ ‘Then you don’t want me’. . . ‘I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me neither,’ I said” (185). Essentially, this final scene redefines the relationship between the oppressor and the formerly oppressed. Hence combined with the erotic, secrecy as a pre-Middle Passage transport helps Ursa and her ancestors undermine male oppression.

4.4 Cane River: Generational Support and the Erotic as Subversion

Subversive behavior establishes the tone for a secret read of Tademy’s Cane River. Divided into three parts to designate each ancestor’s history, Tademy first introduces Suzette as a defiant character. In concert, Tademy also establishes a protective theme. Within this context, Suzette’s mother Elisabeth futilely attempts to make Suzette aware of her place as a slave. We also discover Elisabeth’s efforts to protect Suzette’s impending womanhood. As a mother who has experienced the potential of what Suzette’s future holds on the Rosedew plantation, Elisabeth teaches a young Suzette about their unprotected status as female slaves. Despite the many privileges Suzette reaps as a Cane River slave, including working in the house and attending mass with white Creoles, Elisabeth works to keep Suzette from misinterpreting her identity as the daughter of a slave woman. In other words, Suzette is mere property. Dunbar-Nelson confirms this status of slave children. She writes, “The legal status of the slave was that of mov-

17 See Albert J. Raboteau’s Slave Religion and his research on the concentrated population of Catholic slaves in Louisiana. He suggests slaves’ recognition of the associated privileges, despite its “rigidity” (271).
able property of his master. Children born of Negro parents followed the condition of their mother” (6). Thus according to the laws, any white oppressive actions were expected and protected.

Tademy demonstrates Suzette’s lot with reinforcement from Rosedew’s mistress, Françoise Derbanne. Françoise slaps Suzette for speaking out of place, thus silencing her. Although Elisabeth chastises Suzette, her words ultimately serve to protect her: “‘How many times have I told you to keep your mouth from running? . . . There’s lots worse than slapping. . . . There is no fair. Just do your work, Suzette’” (12). With no protection for herself or for her daughter, Elisabeth can say nothing to her mistress. Instead, we see Elisabeth operate from an Afro-centered psyche. Tademy reveals Elisabeth’s domestic actions in defiance of Françoise’s physical chastisement. Elisabeth uses her cultural past to appease Suzette and to defy Françoise.

Elisabeth states, “‘I’m going to make you a little secret peach cobbler for your birthday tomorrow. No telling anybody else, even Mam’zelle. . . .Understand?’ she said. ‘Not even Mam’zelle!’” [emphasis mine] (13). The secret pact between slave mother and slave daughter may be read as mere motherly affection and appeasement. Yet, Tademy reveals Elisabeth’s defiant exchange, trading Françoise’s slap for her motherly touch. Tademy notes after the secret pact, “Elisabeth reached out and touched Suzette’s arm, insistent. . . .[emphasis mine]” (13). Although usual for a caring mother to console her child with a gentle touch, Elisabeth’s insistence suggests her ancestral intent. More specifically, Elisabeth’s touch originates from a place within her maintained African-derived psyche. Griffin would associate Elisabeth’s insistent touch with a Yoruba ritualistic place of healing. She contends this Yoruba-influenced “‘laying on of hands’” ritual as currently practiced and often used to “challenge white supremacist discourse” (521).
With her role as subversive defender, Elisabeth taps into her erotic power. Lorde reminds us of the erotic woman’s danger due to her empowered self (55). Thus, Tademy’s presentation of Elisabeth as empowered mother demonstrates Lorde’s admonition.

Tademy positions Elisabeth as the authority, using her station as the subservient cook to subvert Francoise’s control as house mistress. Elisabeth purposefully defies Françoise’s demand for less sugar in Oreline’s birthday cobbler. Because of the digestive challenges her husband and Rosedew owner Louis Derbanne experienced, Françoise states, “‘You used far too much sugar in your last peach cobbler, Elisabeth, and Monsieur Derbanne got an upset stomach” (11). Once Françoise slaps Suzette for clarifying the true cause of Louis’s upset stomach—his exorbitant alcoholic consumption—Elisabeth resorts to her most unsuspected and undetected defense, her ancestral and erotic power. Françoise’s post-slap “squint” towards Elisabeth informs her resistance. According to Lorde, “For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel the doing. . .The aim of each thing which we do is to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible” (54-55). We see Elisabeth function precisely for these reasons. She acts in Suzette’s best interests, secretly defending her and undermining Françoise’s authority. Elisabeth even enlists Suzette’s assistance in this teachable moment of subverting power. Elisabeth states, “‘First, use those young legs to get me some more sugar. One extra cup and we’ll make sure this peach cobbler bubbles up nice and sweet for Mam’zelle Oreline’ [emphasis mine]” (13). Tademy’s use of “we” reiterates the ancestral collective experiences Elisabeth instills in her active participant, Suzette.
Tademy acknowledges an attempt to recognize the cultural transference of knowledge via orality, especially since Elisabeth follows her instructive words with resistive action. Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie affirms this point in her treatment of “collective remembering.” She states, “By collective remembering, I mean the relocation and reclamation of the conscious spiritual, and historical, cultural knowledge common to African Americans informed by African spiritual ideals. This shared knowledge transmitted intergenerationally through the use of traditional oral forms reiterates identity and engenders cultural integrity of the group” (11). With Elisabeth and Suzette, Tademy demonstrates this generational transference of cultural knowledge. Suzette’s impressionable eyes watch and her body participates in Elisabeth’s defiance. This subversion teaches Suzette to empower herself and to create for herself, that is, to recognize her erotic power.

Central to the erotic is creative power (Lorde 55), and Elisabeth and Suzette use it in concert with their African-derived subversion. Elisabeth both defends and equips Suzette with the necessary tools to successfully mediate an oppressive society. Perhaps this is why Tademy’s opens the novel with a flashback of Suzette “pee[ing] on the rosebushes” (3). From an African-centered perspective, Suzette would already possess imbedded homeland traits. However her diasporic displacement might cause her to seek out and to reconnect with her distant homeland memories and practices. Tademy reinforces this notion with her treatment of Suzette’s defiance in the opening and closing scenes of the first chapter. Suzette urinates on Françoise’s rosebush on her ninth birthday. In many African spiritual beliefs, the number nine is significant. According to Mbiti, a number’s importance varies, depending on location. He states, “. . .the number nine is sacred in certain areas of Uganda; animals and objects used for sacrifices must
number nine” (Introduction to African Religion 146). In Yoruba religion, “... the number nine is associated with Oya, the Òrìsà of the Joliba (Niger) river, who is also identified with the ancestral maskers whom the Yoruba call the egungun. This secret society is charged with the task of bringing the ancestor back to life in masquerade form—a reiteration of memory [emphasis mine]” (Zauditu-Selassie 157). Zauditu-Selassie’s point aligns with Suzette’s ancestral objectives, that is, to reconnect and to repeat. Urinating on “Françoise Derbanne’s favorite rosebush” (Cane River 18) may indeed signify Suzette’s ritualistic attempt to reiterate memory, to use Elisabeth’s examples, and to draw on those ancestral subversive tactics to defend herself. Instead of irrigating the rosebushes with the purifying, healing properties of water, Suzette opts for one of the most concentrated and destructive forms of fertilization. 18 Tademy clearly presents Suzette’s secretive, subversive intentions, noting that she urinates on the rosebushes “[e]arly the next morning. . .before the household stirred [emphasis mine]”(18). With Elisabeth’s lessons preceding Suzette’s defiance and with these early examples of their resistance, Tademy grounds the novel for a read of secrecy and subversion to oppression.

Tademy demonstrates secrecy as a trope with Suzette’s unspoken sexual assault by the French visitor, Eugene Daurat. In a pivotal scene that foreshadows his imminent attack, Tademy describes Suzette’s twelve year-old body as his prey, the object of Eugene’s gaze. bell hooks explains this imperial gaze as an oppressive stare, “a look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize” (Black Looks 7). Eugene’s double entendre is evident as he compares a young Bordeaux wine to a juvenile Suzette. Both instances signal objects and foreshadow his violent intent. Eugene states, “It has a ravishing bouquet, and a flavor to match. I confess an 1825

18 Although urine is documented as an organic fertilizer, fresh urine is too concentrated and may serve as a herbicide if not diluted.
Lafite may still be a bit young, but sometimes it can be difficult to wait,’ he said [emphasis mine]” (31). Tademy situates Eugene as a white, French male with carte blanche over Suzette’s or any other black female slave’s body, child or not. Eugene’s statement, along with his imperial gaze upon Suzette, signals his secretive, sexual intent.

Unfortunately for Suzette, Elisabeth’s admonition to “take care” and to steer clear of Eugene proves pointless. As an unprotected female slave, “‘everything [on the Rosedew plantation] is [Eugene’s] for the taking’” (36), including Suzette’s body. Tademy writes of the concealment surrounding Suzette’s rape, which occurs after her catechism. She writes, “It was over. Suzette looked down, and even in the dull moonlight she could see that her beautiful white dress was streaked with traces of scarlet. She would need to wash it out in secret, she thought, make sure her mother never saw the stains” (43). Here, Tademy positions the black female body as prey to white male oppression. It further demonstrates the lack of protection for the black female body, as Elizabeth too had experienced sexual objectivity. Elisabeth states, “‘The world didn’t start with you, Suzette. I’ve been through it. In Virginia, with the Master’s son, before coming here. . . It’s Eugene Daurat, isn’t it? Looking at you like you’re some new Louisiana sweetmeat to try’” (49). Tademy shows this sexual oppression and violation as ongoing, something slave women such as Tademy’s Elisabeth and Suzette must recognize. With Elisabeth’s and Suzette’s collective objectification, Tademy reminds us of Harriet Jacobs’s call to her white readership about the plight of the black woman. Jacobs writes, “You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. . .” (56).
Despite her traumatic experience, Suzette’s immediate post-rape reaction reveals an ancestral secretive transport. Unlike Lewis’s position that secrecy in African American literature results from the master/slave relationship, Suzette’s actions reveal an alternate explanation, one with communal implications. In the same manner in which Elisabeth operates from an Afro-centered ethos, so does Suzette. She concerns herself more with not disappointing Elisabeth than with revealing Eugene as the offender. Their collective experience, the shame associated with rape, and Elisabeth’s prior warning initially renders Suzette powerless as a sexual object to Eugene Daurat. Tademy highlights the secret pain Suzette endures in the following passage:

“That she could say out loud that she did not want to be down in secret while he fumbled and sometimes hurt her? Ma chère” (46-47). With no decision over her body, Suzette not only falls victim to Eugene’s sexual advances, she feels she must endure in isolation. The narrator notes, “The longer she hid her secret, the greater the distance between her and everyone else, as if they were all on the close side of Cane River and she were on the opposite bank, alone” (46).

With Suzette’s rape, Tademy suggests an emotional, self-imposed exile from her community. This act, too, reflects an African-derived practice of ridding the community of any behavior that would offend the deities or contaminate the land. \(^{19}\) Although Suzette remains blameless, her rape “upsets the smooth relationship of the community” (Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* 144). With Suzette’s rape, Tademy debunks the long-standing *plâçage* practices accepted in Louisiana. In other words, Suzette did not consent to an arrangement. Therefore despite the proximity within this diverse culture, Tademy demonstrates the lack of protection for black female slaves.

\(^{19}\) Chinua Achebe’s Okonkwo is exiled for his female accident against one of his clansmen (124). See *Things Fall Apart*. 
Tademy reinforces her indebtedness to Jones, echoing the proof of sexual secrecy. Carby confirms this practice during slavery. She writes, “Sexual relations between black women and white men are often used as evidence of the existence of such complicity during the existence of the slave system” (39). Similar to the Corregidora women, Suzette makes generations of Daurats. Eugene’s violation results in two pregnancies, a boy, Gerant, and a girl, Philomene. Initially, we learn of Suzette chosen name for Gerant, Philomon. Tademy, however, reinforces a lack of ownership because Françoise thwarts Suzette’s decision. Tademy writes, “‘They going to call this one Gerant,’ Elisabeth said. ‘Madame already gave him the name.’ ‘But he’s mine, Suzette said shakily.’ ‘His out-loud name is Gerant,’ Elisabeth repeated deliberately. ‘That has to fit him’ [emphasis mine]” (56). For Françoise, Philomon might have been too close to the biblical saint Philemon. Tademy suggests this change reinforces Françoise’s authority over the slaves by enforcing the French colonial history that permeates Louisiana. The narrator states, “Overseeing the birth of the slaves was [Françoise’s] responsibility on Rosedew, and she took her role seriously” (55). Since the name Gerant originates in France and means “director” or “manager,” Françoise’s decision to name him bolsters her position as just that, “manager” or “director.” Thus, despite the care Suzette takes in providing an appropriate name for Philomon/Gerant, we still see this name relegated to Françoise’s control.

In addition to the oppression demonstrated in the previous scene, Tademy also reveals an African-derived place for Suzette’s fervent objection and for Elisabeth’s conciliatory response. Mbiti explains the spiritual significance of naming in Introduction to African Religion (1991). He writes, “The name is considered in African societies to be very much a part of the

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20 Philemon was a wealthy slave owner, leader of the Colossian church, and revered Christian saint to whom the apostle Paul writes.
personality of the person. Therefore it is taken seriously and chosen with care and consider-
ation”(92-93). Boyd-Franklin also reinforces Mbiti’s Afrocentric position about naming. She states, “Many slaves secretly practiced African rituals and spoke the language of their ances-
tors. Children were given ‘slave’ names by their masters and African names by their parents. Because tribal languages were forbidden, these were only spoken in secret” (332-33). Although the etymology of Philomon signals Greek origins, Tademy illustrates Suzette and Elisabeth’s re-
sistance to oppression in their pact to maintain distant homeland connections via African nam-
ing rituals. Therefore, Elisabeth’s secretive appeasement, that is, Gerant’s “out loud name,” signals recognition of Suzette’s and her subversion.

Within this context of this sexual degradation and trauma, Tademy reveals Suzette’s use of ancestral transports and erotic power to resist oppression. She presents Suzette as a trickster figure. In the same way Great Gram charges her descendents to bear witness with children, Suzette goes a step further. She manipulates Eugene by using the evidence of her secret sexual violation, her pregnancies. Suzette enlists her children’s presence to thwart Eugene’s future rapes and to threaten the future legitimacy of his estate. Cane River’s diverse culture and re-
vised laws problematize the legitimacy argument based on race. Violet Harrington Byran states, “The leaving of property to the free children, who were often the products of these [interracial] unions, by their white fathers was a tradition that one can observe in the court records” (48-49). In other words, and most important to Suzette, it could be done.

Evidently, Suzette familiarizes herself with the Louisianan practice of sex leading to freedom for the enslaved female and her children since property could be left to them. She
recognizes her resistance to accept powerlessness, an integral step in tapping into her erotic (Lorde 55). More specifically, Suzette uses her erotic energy in concert with her imbedded African-derived trickster to negotiate a better life for her children. In a conversation with Eugene, we see a pregnant Suzette negotiate Gerant’s freedom. She states, “If you freed him now, he could have a different life. He’s your blood. . . And there’s another child on the way. . . Another boy, I’d say by the kicking. . . They both could be bought out as soon as this one is born, and raised free. I’ve seen it happen” (66). It has, in fact, happened.

Connie Eble cites an historic example of black female erotic with Marie Thereze Coincoin. In short, a white Creole, Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer, fathered 10 of Coincoin’s 14 children. Once freed, “Coincoin systematically negotiated or bought the freedom [emphasis mine]” of her children (44). Tademy historicizes Coincoin and Metoyer’s role in her novel with their son, Augustin Metoyer. In the novel, he builds the chapel in which all Cane River residents worshiped. The narrator states, “Augustine [sic] Metoyer was the most famous of all the gens de couleur libre. The closest [Suzette] had ever been to Cane River royalty before was her godmother, a free woman of color who had married into that famous family” (6). The Metoyer history is significant, here, because it provides Suzette with a concrete example of the possibilities of freedom and protection. Hence, Suzette uses Eugene’s and perhaps white men’s fears of illegitimacy exposing them and threatening their property and legacy. Using her desire for her children’s freedom, Suzette disarms Eugene’s sexual advances. Suzette’s love for her children empowers her to change; this power is essential in noting the erotic’s use as transformative. Suzette’s act serves as a reminder of Lorde’s advice to understand the power of the erotic; that is, Suzette “examine[s] the way in which [her] world can truly be different” (Lorde 55). This dif-
ference for Suzette rests in a potentially secure family, one which an oppressed system historically failed to guarantee.

Reiterating the ancestral guide in African-derived cultures, Tademy provides Suzette with someone whose status benefits Suzette’s protective objective. Suzette enlists the help of Doralise, marriane (godmother) to her and her children, and most important to Suzette, a gens de couleur libre with a last name. Doralise’s status as a free person of color proves essential to Suzette securing her children’s protection, particularly since Doralise’s skin shade signals her multiracial heritage and class-based influence. Dunbar-Nelson records, “. . . [O]n account of the extensive miscegenation so common in the French colonies there had been produced in that state various classes of mixed breeds enjoying degrees of freedom in conformity with their proximity or separation from the white race” (21). Since Suzette was not protected as a child, she seeks security from Doralise, someone free who has influence within Cane River’s complicated power dynamics. Ultimately, Suzette desires to legitimize her children with freedom and a last name. Suzette states, “If this baby could not have a last name, at least it would have protection from someone who did [emphasis mine]” (68).

Philomene is another character who uses the erotic to undermine authority. As Suzette’s daughter, Philomene possesses spiritual powers called glimpings—the ability to prophecy or glimpse into the future. Because she uses her powers to resist and to subvert oppressive definitions of legitimacy, these powers are erotic and African-descended. To contextualize, Philomene’s status subjects her to the same secret sexual violations as her mother. As the daughter of Eugene Daurat and Suzette, therefore a Creole slave, Philomene possesses the influential skin tone which reflects her “protected” last name. Also similar to Suzette and Elisa-
beth, Philomene possesses a defiant spirit, boldly affirming her identity and exposing the secret legacies of slavery. She professes, “‘I am Philomene Daurat and he [Eugene] is Papa’” (124).

Similar to Suzette’s history with Eugene, Philomene becomes the object of a white man’s gaze. Tademy notes that Narcisse, who had grown up with Suzette, gives “Philomene a distinct look of possessiveness” (129). Unlike those colored Creole mothers who secured their daughters’ protection by partnering them with white Creole men (Martin 66), Suzette has a different motivation, one which she fears she will not secure because of her own childhood sexual violations. The narrator states, “... as she helped Philomene serve, [Suzette] couldn’t rid herself of the lingering sour taste that lodged itself at the back of her mouth” (129). In this example, Tademy displays a collective female experience, one which equates security with legitimacy.

Of the previously mentioned women, Philomene is the only one who succeeds in securing a legal last name for her children. Perhaps because she openly identifies as one with a last name and overtly defies Eugene by formally introducing herself to him with it (116), Philomene ultimately becomes one with a last name. Since Tademy connects each generation’s collective experience, Philomene breaks the cycle of legal insecurity through her supernatural gift. A.B.T. Byaruhanga-Akiiki writes of the divine links present in African-derived people with spiritual gifts. He states, “Certain people have special relationships with the spirits, saints, the divinities, even God. There are people who act as priests, prophets...and several types of mediums” (193). Tademy presents Philomene as one of the initiated.

Philomene’s erotic usage rests in her ability to deceive with foresight. She uses her glimpsings to manipulate her sexual interactions with Narcisse Fredieu, who grows up with Su-
zette and Oreline. Although she has no choice in these sexual encounters, Philomene uses her glimpsings to protect her children’s future by granting them a last name. The narrator states, “Narcisse had returned three months ago, long enough to give Emily his last name and long enough to plant another baby [emphasis mine]” (264). With Narcisse, Philomene uses her position as an object to make herself a subject. Using her erotic power in concert with her imbedded and maintained African-derived defiance, Philomene operates as a trickster.

Tademy elucidates subversion in Philomene’s false glimpses of Narcisse. She prophesies, “I see you, an old man, visiting graves of two women you married. When you are through, you come back to me. There are many children. . . Our children. They have been brought up quality, never hungry, and they wear new clothes and soft leather shoes fit to their feet. We live in a big house enough to hold all the children, not this cabin. They call you Papa [emphasis mine]” (296). This illustration highlights Philomene’s deceptive, yet necessary actions, particularly because Narcisse’s participation in the Civil War has the potential to thwart their unborn child’s last name. Philomene’s erotic power manipulates Narcisse so much so that he becomes “guided by her glimpsing” (253). Philomene also tricks Narcisse in order to educate Emily, to secure her own land, and to unite her extended family. Clearly, Philomene’s erotic has been discovered because, like Lorde, her kernel has “released from its intense and constrained pellet” (57).

Tademy positions Philomene as aware of her deception as well. The narrator writes of her glimpsing to Narcisse, “She knew how to play the trick now. . . ‘I see Emily and your son together. . . Both he and Emily carry your name. . . Elisabeth and Gerant are close by [emphasis mine]” (270).
In addition to her ancestors’ erotic power, Tademy introduces another character instrumental in Philomène’s success, Doralise Derbanne. Although of no blood relation to Tademy, Doralise must be considered for her role as protective guide, which is pertinent to Suzette’s and Philomène’s security. Tademy hints that Philomène could not have succeeded in duping Narcisse had Doralise’s influence as a *gens de couleur libre* gone unnoticed. Her skin tone, a direct result of the miscegenation that occurred in Louisiana, as well as her status as Louis Derbanne’s daughter, catapults Doralise within the Cane River community. Dunbar-Nelson writes, “It was this Creole element who in 1763 obtained a decision from Louis XV that all mixed bloods who could claim descent from an Indian ancestor in addition to a white out-ranked those mixed bloods who had only white and African ancestors” (9). Her distinction as the daughter of a French planter and her position in a “middle place” (Tademy 15) positions Doralise Derbanne as shrewd business woman who demonstrates her ingenuity to secure her future as well.

Similar to Suzette, Doralise uses her erotic and African-derived energies to secure her status with Eugene Daurat. Historically, a black woman and a white man could not marry; nonetheless, Doralise’s financial security within the openness of *plaçage* benefits her. According to Joan M. Martin, *plaçage* denotes “the practice that existed in Louisiana (and other French and Spanish slaveholding territories) whereby women of color—the option of legal marriage denied them—entered into long-standing formalized relationships with white European men” (55-58). *Plaçage* was considered a practical and “ingenious” option by many colored Creole women who were considered desirable by French men (64). Tademy situates Doralise as a free woman of color and subversive object of Eugene’s desires. Her strategy is duly deceptive because Tademy
positions her as one who plays on the history of European men’s preference for multiracial women. Martin notes that European men were generally “drawn to the [Creole] women for their sheer beauty and elegance, and in many cases simply preferred women of color over whites” (62). Because she knows Eugene desires her enough to assist with her divorce from her abusive husband, Doralise takes legal advantage of *pl açage*. Tademy notes, “. . . he wanted her *so badly* [emphasis mine] that he bribed the courts to grant her a divorce from her crazy husband, a *gens de couleur libre* who had tried to kill her with a knife one morning as she was fixing breakfast. And he went down to the courthouse again to *gift her his land and his house* [emphasis mine]”, to convince her just how sincere he was” (119). Similar to Coincoin, who revises *pl açage* with Metoyer to purchase her children and establish a home, so too does Doralise. Doralies’s shrewdness pays off and seals her financial future, evolving from divorcée of a free man of color to *placée* of a white Frenchman. Doralise manipulates him to “give her the house before he [gets] worn down” (146). Having tapped into the power of her erotic and channeled her inner trickster, Doralise serves as an example for Philomene to secure a version of the same with Narcisse.

Tademy’s final character and ancestor Emily completes the lineage as well as the generational use of female erotic power. As a Creole woman of color and daughter of Philomene and Narcisse, Emily Fredieu finds her status as one with a legitimate last name beneficial. It affords her an opportunity to be formally educated away from Cane River’s confines. Spearheaded by Philomene’s persuasive glimpses that Emily learn to read, Narcisse insists on sending Emily to New Orleans to “learn to read and write in English and make [her] first communion there”

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21 Eble notes the lack of white women in colonial Louisiana instead (46).
22 A Creole woman of color in *pl açage* with a white man.
This resolve to educate Emily echoes the historic practice of Creole women’s fathers sending them to convents to study (Dunbar-Nelson 29). In fact, Boyd-Franklin substantiates this practice of educating multiracial children. She states, “The children of [interracial unions] were given certain privileges based on their lighter skin color and were often allowed to be house servants rather than work in the fields. This created a double-bind, in which skin color often brought privilege, freedom, and even educational opportunities. . .” (334). What Emily studies, however, is Joseph Billes, Narcisse’s French acquaintance with whom Emily immediately becomes intrigued (314). The significance here concerns Emily’s subversive pursuit of Joseph. With Emily’s history, Tademy disrupts the collective experience of Emily’s ancestors and the white men who violated them. In other words, as much as an ex-slave and Creole female can, Emily preys on Joseph.

Tademy demonstrates a reversal of power as a young Emily erotically assesses Joseph’s physical features. Evident in Tademy’s text is her commentary on the “bleaching” of racial lines. Earlier in the novel, we learn of Suzette’s color struck attitude towards a brown-skinned Clement and his interest in a light-skinned Philomene. Elisabeth states, “Philomene, sometimes Suzette gets beside herself over color. His brown doesn’t make him bad, and your yellow doesn’t make you good” (105). However, Tademy makes us at least consider the origin of Suzette’s preference for lighter skin. For Suzette, light skin serves as the site for potential protection. In a close-knit culture that emphasizes freedoms based on race, class, and legitimacy, Tademy provides an explanation for Suzette’s rationale of skin tones and names. The narrator states, “She knew the Ones with Last Names could buy those she loved, if they chose. Eugene Daurat.
Oreline Derbanne. Doralise Derbanne. Narcisse Fredieu” (94). Thus for Suzette, those with last names were white or had light skin.

For an impressionable Emily, Joseph possesses the advantageous qualities she needs to secure her status as a free woman of color. Joseph has money, land, and the physical features to contribute to the blurred the lines of race. The narrator states, “Everything about Joseph, his wiry build and careless walk, the sharpness of his nose, the thick flow of his hair, thrilled Emily. . .his hazel eyes and his spare lips working together to produce a devilish smile [emphasis mine]” (317-18). Tademy shares these traits because, along with Emily’s white appearance, any potential children they might produce could reap the benefits associated with passing. Further, this description disarms a potential misread of Emily as sexual prey to Joseph. Tademy positions Emily as a Catholic school girl with a crush on Joseph. The difference between Emily’s experience and her ancestors’ experiences with white men is that Emily desires Joseph. Tademy writes, “. . . each breath she drew, every thought she held, took Joseph Billes into consideration. She was almost fourteen, a woman now. Joseph Billes just didn’t realize it yet [emphasis mine]” (315). Emily’s chase of Joseph, however, is realized. From an Afrocentric read for sexual secrecy and subversion, Emily’s intent is evident. Tademy’s diction clearly maps Emily’s ancestral draw. Essentially, Emily wills her way to Joseph. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., would posit that Emily channels Esu or the Signifying Monkey to sexually undermine her oppressive circumstances based on race, class, and gender. In other words, Emily uses essential trickster traits that Gates associates with West African mediations—“sexuality” and “disruption” (The Signifying Monkey 6). Using her trickster mediations, coupled with her female erotic power, Emily accelerates her future security by preying on Joseph and trapping him as the legitimate father of her children.
Ultimately, Emily secures her family’s legacy by obtaining legal last names and financial protection.

Instead of a scene where a white man gazes on a slave woman, Emily conducts her research. Instead of a violent rape, Tademy highlights a courtship of sorts. Instead of a fight for a name, Tademy situates Emily and Joseph in *plaçage* and their children with a last name. As the last generation of Tademy’s maternal ancestors, Emily is the only one who chooses her children’s father. Unlike Jones’s ancestors who orally transmit their histories to Ursa, Emily never learns of her mother, grandmother, and great grandmother’s experiences because this essential history is not passed on. Because Emily’s lasting image is one that continues to pass for white, Tademy positions her actions as shunning the very racial group to which society dictates she belongs. A surface reading may imply that Emily’s family’s protective silences result in her identity deficiency. However, from an Afrocentric perspective, Emily’s unbridled defiance represents her continued mediation through a society which seeks to define her.
CONCLUSION

This dissertation has demonstrated that twentieth-century African American literature may be read as a reflection on the central but often unacknowledged legacy of secrecy in black diasporic cultures. Historical and sociological accounts suggest that secrecy in African American literature originates in West and West Central African cultures. Secrecy, thus, traveled with and continued to be practiced by Middle Passage captives that survived the transport to the New World. As a result of this culturally embedded tradition, secrecy resonates as an ancestral echo in African American literature and culture. To understand secrecy and its prevalence within African American literature, we must consider the transported cultural practices, including spiritualities, philosophies, and worldviews of the homeland. Without this lens, the uninitiated may limit its presence and function as a mere effect of chattel enslavement. This limited perspective would omit any necessary consideration of the literature specific to overall African-derived experiences throughout the diaspora.

As an import, secrecy is significant in African American literature and culture because it reflects a tradition that the Middle Passage and chattel slavery did not conquer. Similar to pre-Middle Passage practices that John S. Mbiti, Albert J. Raboteau, Michael A. Gomez record, as well as customs noted in African-derived literature, secrecy traveled with African captives. In fact, secrecy as a trope in African American literature moves beyond a mere consequence of master/slave relationships, as Leslie Lewis asserts, because secrecy’s use may be seen prior to this chattel slavery. This study’s findings, then, contest those critical studies which cite slavery as the impetus for secrecy in African American literature and culture.
To understand African heritage, Mbiti posits the need to consider an African worldview via African spirituality (Introduction to African Religion 14). An African-derived secret lens provides a glimpse into the complex legacy of the African-derived psyche and further highlights embedded and instructive traditions. Hence, a read for secrecy in African American literature offers essential insight for comprehending this motif because African spirituality encompasses secrecy. Also noted are the adjustments Africans made once they landed throughout the diaspora. Raboteau records Africans’ mutability as essential to their New World experiences (Canaan Land 13), thus their need to modify their secretive practices due to geographic displacement. In the same way that Gomez notes the “cultural insignia” specific to West and West Central Africa (Diasporic Africa 9), an examination based on secrecy advances the culturally specific dialogues associated with African American literature. Therefore, a read for secrecy in African American literature is crucial to comprehend this rich tradition outside of slavery’s legacy.

Predating the slave tradition, secrecy changed over time. Its evolution in oral works where griots and soothsayers subverted language to induce critical thinking and self-awareness, as well as to instruct, may be seen in The Epic of Sundiata. Covert tactics created hidden meanings in poetry and reflected cosmological homeland ties (West, African Spirituality 29), as seen in Phillis Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” Manipulative discourse protested the transatlantic slave trade and validated cultural practices once stereotyped as savage by European worldviews; this may be seen in Olaudah Equiano’s The Interesting Narrative. These early works signal an authentic point of origin for the secrecy trope found within twentieth-century African American literature.
As time progressed, the secret legacy revised its linguistic, subversive intent to battle discrimination and oppression. Within the United States, secrecy grew more complex for African Americans. According to Nancy Boyd-Franklin, “‘[S]ecrets’ related more to the ancient stories, which were entrusted to a few of the elders and were passed on, through the oral tradition, to future generations. . . With the impact of slavery, however, African people were torn from their homeland and brought to a very different and oppressive world” (332). Based on Boyd-Franklin’s point, slavery’s legacy affected initial secretive purposes; it did not produce them. West African silences and wordplay, which traveled to the New World, evolved into African American variations and manipulations called signifyin(g). Within this study, verbal revisions serve as foundations to critique the cult of true womanhood, as witnessed in Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig. Language subversions continued to resonate with Elizabeth Keckley’s political opposition to the cult of domesticity in Behind the Scenes.

At the turn of the century, secretive language practices evolved into physical manifestations used to resist privileges based on racial constructs. Secret identities via race passing continued the homeland link to deception, as seen in James Weldon Johnson’s Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man and Nella Larsen’s Passing. Since identity connects people to their lineage, secret tactics may be employed to avoid potential disruption of the unit, particularly should Western religious influences conflict African-derived spiritual beliefs, as testified in James Baldwin’s Go Tell It On the Mountain and Alice Walker’s The Color Purple. Biologically, family connections reflect prior sexual relationships; thus, secret practices may further complicate identity and family ties, especially those silences rooted in traditions that rely on oppression. Combined with their ancestral subversions, black women tapped into their creative and spiritu-
al power, the erotic, to change their lots and ultimately aspire, as seen in Gayl Jones’s
*Corregidora* and Lalita Tademy’s *Cane River*. A closer examination of the twentieth-century
texts in this study reveal three distinct secret categories—identity, family, and sex. Because of
their interconnectivity, any of these three secret types may be applied to African American lit-
erature. Secrecy survives in twentieth-century African American literature and culture due to
the collective ingrained and maintained recollections of the African-derived psyche. Hence, se-
crecy centers African American culture and literature.

Family connects the secret categories and serves as the common denominator in the
this study’s twentieth-century works. This dissertation finds that these texts integrate secrecy
as a means to remain connected to family and community. Whether by way of homeland recol-
leions in Wheatley’s poem or by subverting the sexual power structures in *Cane River*, this
study elucidates familial or communal connection as imperative to African Americans. Signifi-
cant to African American literature, the secrets presented in this study further imply that Afri-
can Americans keep secrets to resist the separation from family that occurred as a result of
slavery’s legacy. Although a consensus records the importance of community within African
American culture overall, this study finds that family connection drives many of the silences
within. In other words, any fear of shame and exclusion precedes any “right” or “wrong” act. As
long as the person is a part of the group, this is what seems to matter for the African-derived
person. Thus to ensure belonging, many individuals will secretly do whatever keeps them in the
fold. This emphasis on community connection permeates African American culture.

Hence, of all the secret types, family resonates as most significant because the secrets
presented in this study signal family protection and unification. Similar to other transported
practices, particularly secrecy, familial or communal connections embed the African American psyche. I do not suggest that ethnicities outside of African American cultures devalue family or community. However, the manner in which African Americans incorporate familial connectedness in literature and culture link to maintained pre-Middle Passage practices; that is, they tend to operate collectively. John S. Mbiti explains his position on the “communal” rather than the “individual” in An Introduction to African Religion (15). He argues the vitality of family within the African American community, noting its direct link to African Religion:

[African Religion’s] beliefs are held by the community; therefore it does not matter much whether or not the individual accepts all beliefs. The ceremonies are performed mainly in or by a group of the family, by relatives, by the whole population of one area or by those engaged in a common population. . . Since African Religion belongs to the people, no individual. . .can stand apart and reject the whole of his people’s religion. To do so would mean to cut himself off from the total life of his people [emphasis mine]. (15)

Thus, Mbiti maintains the essential communal connection particular to people of African descent because African Religion is based within the community. Without this link, an individual becomes alien to the very entity that grooms it. Perhaps this is why in the much of the literature, the village steps in to assist if a character voluntarily or involuntarily becomes isolated from its society.23 Therefore to protect the values within the community, especially alienation due to public shame, many African Americans operate out of the spirit of communal support.

23 See Toni Morrison’s Beloved. The community women exorcise Beloved from Sethe’s household and reinstate Sethe to the fold. See p. 257-59.
This importance of family is evident in Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* as the narrator passes over for access. Because of his reality as a man of color, the ex-colored man *decides* to pass to be privy to the same economic means available to white men. The narrator concludes that he will hide his race from his children, as well as theirs, to protect them. Ultimately, his deceit leads to his desire to protect the family he gains while passing over.

Larsen’s co-protagonist Irene conceals her encounter with Jack so that she can protect her family from her perception threat of Clare’s threatening presence. Revealing the encounter, she reasons, would threaten her troubled marriage with Brian. Furthermore, Larsen’s naming of Clare indicates a familial connection. Clare navigates by her maiden name, Kendry, not Bellew. This suggests more of a kinship to Kendry, her father’s surname, not to Bellew, her married white name. In this way, Larsen may signal a rejection of Clare’s passing identity. “Clare” intimates “clear,” while “Kendry” signals “kin,” as in linked or “clearly related.” Larsen’s name play reinforces Clare’s urgency to return to her black, communal beginnings.

A fear of breaking up the family and community resonates in *Go Tell It On the Mountain* and *The Color Purple*. Gabriel’s secrecy stems from his desire to hide his adultery. If revealed, he may be distanced from his immediate and church family. Deborah withholds her knowledge of Gabriel’s affair to keep them unified as a family. Elizabeth conceals her pregnancy from Richard because she felt him too stressed and overwhelmed to deal. Florence holds Deborah’s letter, which contains information about Gabriel’s illegitimate child. John’s same-sex secret desires may further outcast him from Gabriel and from the black church. Walker’s Harpo secretly impregnates Sofia so he can establish his own family. Sofia subverts society’s perception of her as a woman and later reveals that Henrietta is not biologically Harpo’s daughter. Celie with-
holds her incestuous pain because revealing her rape would, in her eyes, dishonor her parents.

Mr. ___ keeps Nettie’s letters from Celie to ensure his control over her, thus keeping her in the family.

An emphasis on family may be seen in the sections focusing on sexual secrecy. Ursa’s Great-Gram, Gram, and mother subvert Corregidora’s ill-intent by voicing their collective experiences as oppressed women. Because of the women’s insistence on passing down Corregidora’s sexual violations, Ursa becomes the vehicle to thwart his exploitative legacy.

Ursa’s disruption of Corregidora’s influence ties her infertility to her inability to pass on the secret sexual shame of her family’s past. Family reigns supreme for Suzette, Philomene, and Emily. Each character attempts to establish a legitimate family of her own by undermining the very systems that sought to oppress them. Suzette’s rape threatens Elisabeth’s initial warning; thus, Suzette does not want to disappoint her with the shame of it. Both Philomene and Emily seek legitimacy for their children by ensuring that they have a last name, therefore, a legacy.

This study demonstrates, then, secrecy’s functions beyond mere silence and omission. The silences presented in this study link to family and communal connection. If the unit is threatened in any way, these texts demonstrate what people will go through in order to protect and to preserve it, including harboring secrets. Peggy Papp suggests the same; that is, protective secrets are the most common (72). Perhaps this most common need to protect and preserve connects the numerous examples of secrecy existing in twentieth century African American literature and culture.

Overall, the works within this study are crucial in the discussion of secrecy in twentieth century African American literature because they demonstrate the maintenance of the secre-
tive, coded language particular to the homeland. From epics to novels, these various genres within African American literature do not silence or halt the secrecy within. Instead, they demonstrate a lasting, traditional transfer of the cultural elements that African-based community members exude. Once uprooted from the homeland, these traditions traveled also and were manifested in a variety of ways. The works that signify elucidate a type of controlled language that resists and disrupts, so much so that those who manipulate it re-create themselves as change agents in the literature.

Reading African American literature for its secrecy trope enhances existing readings by specifying its connection as a maintained entity within African spirituality. Georgene Bess Montgomery argues for a similar consideration of her Ifá paradigm as a more enriching lens to analyze African-derived texts in The Spirit and the Word (180). I posit that a reading for secrecy will offer a much needed insight into an African worldview, including secrecy’s transport and the emphasis on family. Applying secrecy as a trope elucidates family ties and continues the legacy within African American literature and culture. Similar to the spiritual transports West notes in African Spirituality, secrecy may also serve as a cosmological attempt to continue homeland traditions (31).

Bernard Bell writes, the African American novel is “. . . a development of the African American oral tradition and raises a number of questions, essentially, ‘What, in short, is distinctive about the Afro American novel?’” (3). Secrecy in African American literature, then, answers Bell’s question. Reminiscent of the cultural aspects difficult to infiltrate and to comprehend by the uninitiated, secrecy may be difficult to assess because some outsiders may not possess or recognize the ingrained awareness of its significance. One of those distinctions Bell questions
includes the ability to validate ancestral connections that survived the transport via the Middle Passage and regard them as integral tropes within the African American literary tradition. Given the findings included in this dissertation, secrecy, too, must be one of those African American distinctions. Shaped a by personal experience and echoed in research, this dissertation credits the secret motif in twentieth-century African American literature to pre-Middle Passage practices.
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