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Intercessory Power: A Literary Analysis of Ethics and Care in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Alice Walker's *Meridian*, and Toni Cade Bambara's *Those Bones Are Not My Child*

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Intercessory Power: A Literary Analysis of Ethics and Care in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*,
Alice Walker's *Meridian*, and Toni Cade Bambara's *Those Bones Are Not My Child*

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving, supportive family. Joseph, you are my person. You love me even though I am imperfect, and I cannot imagine life without you and the joy you bring our family. Mom, you have always believed in me more than anyone else and known exactly what I needed to hear to be encouraged and motivated. You also made late night writing sessions possible, without which I would not have finished this project. Dad, you have always made me feel as if I could accomplish my highest goals. Olivia, you do not know this, but you have been one of my biggest inspirations. I wanted to show you what Mommy can do, and I pray that you will always believe in yourself and know that I am forever in your corner, cheering you on. Levi, you made late-night thinking and writing sessions possible with your inability to sleep through the night. As I held you tight in those wee hours, I admired you and had the inspiration I needed to persist. To my extended family, you have been patient and continued to believe in me, and for that, I am incredibly grateful. I love you all.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine post-Reconstruction literature as an intercessor that creates a common memory among readers and activates them as ethical agents who can move through retributive violence rather than enact violence. With the increase of racial violence in the United States, it is essential to find ways to end the cycle of retributive violence and establish a justice system that does not marginalize individuals but forges connections in the midst of oppression. This literary analysis engages three novels—Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, Alice Walker’s *Meridian*, and Toni Cade Bambara’s *Those Bones Are Not My Child: A Novel*—written by African American women authors about three time periods—Jim Crow Era, Civil Rights Movement, and Contemporary. James Phelan’s four ethical situations provide an overarching framework for the three body chapters. Chapter One examines characters within *Song of Solomon* using hermeneutical narrative ethics. Chapter Two uses feminist ethics of care as well as hermeneutical narrative ethics to analyze how Walker as implied author crafts Meridian Hill as an ideal, ethical agent. Finally, Chapter Three engages the aforementioned methods as well as coalitional politics to examine how Bambara’s narration shows how a community is transformed in the midst of oppressive violence in *Those Bones Are Not My Child*. Ultimately, this study finds that literature has the ability to transform readers as they ethically commit to redemption rather than retribution. The combination of hermeneutical narrative ethics with feminist ethics of care and coalitional politics has the power to change readers’ approach to literature, making one publically accountable for their private reading of a text.

INTRODUCTION

“You can’t do reconciliation work, you can’t do restoration work, you can’t do racial justice work, you can’t create the outcome that you desire until there has been truth-telling.”

—Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*

“Where common memory is lacking, where people do not share in the same past, there can be no real community. Where community is to be formed, common memory must be created.”

—Georges Erasmus, Dene elder

This study examines literature as an intercession against violence and retribution. United States’ history since Reconstruction is fraught with racial violence. Unfair laws and unconstitutional practices exacerbate marginalization and threaten to keep Americans in a cycle of racial violence and tension if not drawn to a different system of justice. I examine how three texts—Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, Alice Walker’s *Meridian*, and Toni Cade Bambara’s *Those Bones Are Not My Child: A Novel*—written by African American women authors about three time periods—Jim Crow Era, Civil Rights Movement, and Contemporary—deal with racial injustice and how reading these texts in light of narrative ethics, feminist ethics of care, and coalitional politics helps readers move through violence and retribution without enacting actual violence and retribution by creating a common memory¹ among readers.

¹ Mark Charles, a Native American activist, public speaker and presidential candidate, uses the term common memory in his study of American history that concentrates on race, culture, and faith. His notion of common memory derives from Georges Erasmus’ words that open this introduction. Charles is committed to racial conciliation; he does not believe reconciliation is the proper term because there has never been healing between races. Charles acknowledges the root of the problem is a white supremacist system that was established during Abraham Lincoln’s presidency and remains intact today. He claims Lincoln won the war of Manifest Destiny, ethnically cleansing the land of native people, and we live in the remnants of that war as every facet of American life is built on white supremacist ideals. He recommends a season of lament as a first step toward conciliation, acknowledging our complicity in a broken history. He believes a national dialogue is needed on race, gender, and

The idea of forging connection in the midst of oppression frames my research questions for this project: namely, how does literature allow people to move through violence and retribution without enacting violence and retribution, and what role can coalitions play in curbing the need for retributive violence? I aim to demonstrate that these three authors open a space in their respective texts for readers to interrogate the ethical mode presented and determine how they can respond as moral agents. That model, stemming from the literature, serves as a pathway of avoidance for contemporary readers so they do not have to enact violence and retribution in their own lives but can instead transform the established order that oppresses and subordinates. It might seem ironic to open with a quotation about truth-telling in a work analyzing fiction, but that is where narrative ethics is relevant. As Wayne C. Booth argues, stories do not have to be based on real-life events to be imitations of life (*Company* 15). While the works are fiction, they open a space for real-life readers to tell the truth—about themselves and to others.

At the outset, let me tell the truth about myself. To some, it might seem suspicious for me, a white woman, to devote my scholarly interests to novels written by African American women. It is understandable why a reader would question my motives; however, I enter this writing space as more than merely a white woman. I enter this space as a spiritual person who believes in the power of redemptive love over retributive violence. I value all human life and believe that racial strife and violence can be reduced when we are faced with stories that make us see people as people. I realize this belief in redemptive love makes me an optimist and affects how I perceive the role of the reader, but these beliefs are ultimately tied to who I am as a

class in the United States through a Truth and Conciliation Commission. His targeted audience is the church, native people, and people of color as both survivors and perpetrators examine the trauma associated with history. His work is relevant to the foundation of my study because I believe reading literature through a narrative and feminist ethical lens can build the common memory necessary for community and racial healing. (Charles, “The Truth of Our History”).

feminist. As Sarah Bessey claims in *Jesus Feminist*, feminism is a way for people to take part in a redemptive movement (14). She notes, “Feminism gained popularity as a result of “secular” work and scholarship, but the line between sacred and secular is man-made” (12). I have had to reconcile my beliefs as a Christian with my position as a feminist. I understand why so many believe the two to be mutually exclusive; however, I think theologian John G. Stackhouse says it well, “Christian feminists can celebrate any sort of feminism that brings more justice and human flourishing to the world, no matter who is bringing it, since we recognize the hand of God in all that is good” (qtd. in Bessey 13). Ultimately, redemption should be the goal of life and literature.

I study works by African American women because I find invaluable voices within these pages written by women who were and are brave enough to take on the evils of white supremacy and patriarchy. They craft stories that dismantle oppressive systems, and they challenge me to become a better person who is committed to checking my privilege and complicity with these systems. I cannot read these texts and remain unchanged. This commitment to self-transformation is embodied in Alice Walker’s definition of womanism.² Famously, Walker defines a womanist as “a black feminist or feminist of color...committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (*In Search* xi). Womanism invites racial, sexual,

² I am including Walker’s entire four-part definition of womanism because it is important to understanding the full scope of her theory. “1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “you acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. 2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?” Ans. “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.” 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.”

and gender coalition; however, the person must commit to moving and working across borders to bring critical attention to black folk art, and I long for my work to do that. Walker's definition of womanist goes on to describe a politics of love, and one component of that is a love of struggles. It is important to also acknowledge at the outset the difficulty of this work that is rooted in resistance against hegemonic domination.

I have made it my life's work to introduce students to texts written by writers who are marginalized because of their politics of location, and the goal, as M. Jacqui Alexander would argue, is to inspire emancipatory praxis.³ For many of my students at Warner University,⁴ it is the first time they are reading a text written by a woman of color. The final reflections I get over and over again are, "This class should be required of all students," and "I'm committing to finding and reading more authors like these ones." These students are the reason I optimistically conceive an ethical reader because I continue to have them in my classes every semester. I aim to inspire critical self-consciousness that leads to self-transformation.

In Spring 2018, I had the opportunity to teach a class entitled "The American Novel." The official course description allows for a variety of themes and texts. I chose to assign the three novels on which I focus in this dissertation. I will describe the student make-up of the class so I can provide a richer description of the hurdles we faced with *coduction*.⁵ I had six students: one student is a white female; she identifies as a lesbian. Her family lived in Florida but moved to Pennsylvania while she was in college. Another female student is also white and grew up in a

³ M. Jacqui Alexander is a Professor Emerita of Women and Gender Studies at the University of Toronto, and she is a leading transnational feminist whose work centers on, among other things, pedagogy and the sacred. Her work is important to my study because as I am linking pedagogy and ethics, there is a bent toward social justice, and Alexander emphasizes the significance of crafting courses with teaching for justice in mind.

⁴ Warner University is a private, liberal arts institution. It is affiliated with the Church of God in Anderson, Indiana. I have taught a variety of survey and upper-level literature courses during my tenure at Warner.

⁵ I define *coduction* more thoroughly in the chapter on *Song of Solomon*, but it is the term Booth uses for putting a reader's comparative assertion of a text next to another's interpretation. This is when readers make their private readings of a text public.

very conservative Christian home in Lake Wales, Florida. She was home-schooled and while she has travelled for mission trips, she is still sheltered. She identifies as heterosexual. The final female is black and grew up with her mother and two sisters who are very close in age to her. She went to public school; she identifies as heterosexual. Her Christian faith is a large part of her personality and worldview. There were three males in the class. One male is black and grew up in Indiana with his mother. His father is incarcerated. He is at Warner on an athletic scholarship. He identifies as heterosexual. Another male is white and much like the second female, he grew up being home-schooled in an extremely conservative, patriarchal home. He identifies as heterosexual. The final male is white and grew up in West Virginia. He was difficult to get to know because he did not contribute to discussions and had poor attendance.

Although this class was small, the students represented cross-sections of society, and their diversity enhanced our class discussions. We acknowledged their intersectionality as we discussed the intersectionality of oppression the assigned authors and their characters endured. *Coduction* happened in an interesting way throughout this course. Naturally, the students were assigned reading for each session. The private act of reading took place outside of the classroom. I loved seeing these students in various places around campus, reading the assigned novels. When we convened in the classroom, reading became a public act. Through discussions, students participated in *coduction*, literally putting their reading next to someone else's who would support or challenge their presuppositions and judgments. In occasionally heated ways, students' life experiences and material conditions of life butted against another's.

Meridian was likely the most polarizing novel we read. It was easy for students to acknowledge that racial violence is wrong; however, this particular group of students with their unique politics of location had to grapple with Meridian's actions, particularly her abortions. The

two students who had been home-schooled were staunchly opposed to abortion. For them, neither family upbringing nor sexual violence were reasons to justify terminating a pregnancy. It was difficult for them to discern the good Meridian was accomplishing for civil rights because of this perceived character flaw. During one of the discussions, I did a “penny for your thoughts” activity to facilitate discussion.⁶ The male student who had been home-schooled threw one of his pennies into the bowl and said, “I think the unborn babies she killed experienced a lot more pain than [Meridian] did.” This was a heated moment, and I knew the white female who identifies as lesbian had a particularly tough time with that statement even though she did not challenge him. I gave them time to complete a written reflection afterward, and her reflection confirmed my suspicion of her discomfort with his assertions. Public *coduction* failed in class that day because the female student was intimidated to share her private reading publicly. This classroom moment still haunts me, but I realize what was lacking was not just pedagogical finesse on my part; it was my male student’s inability to invite self-transformation. He is outwardly as privileged as one might possibly be: a straight, white male from an affluent home studying at a private school on a full basketball scholarship. For *coduction* to happen and lead to self-transformation, a reader has to engage in self-examination and be activated as an ethical agent.

This process of public reading shaped my belief in literature as an intercessor that has the power to create a common memory. These students, from very different walks of life, shared in a reading experience that made them accountable to each other. As one white, female student wrote in the final course reflection, “I became genuinely upset for the privilege I realized I had, and that I had never done anything about it. Since the beginning of the semester I’ve done a lot

⁶ Each student is given five pennies, and I take five as the instructor as well. All participants must spend a penny each time they want to contribute to the discussion. Everyone must spend all their pennies, and no one may be given more. The activity limits the frequency with which the instructor can intervene to carry the discussion, and it invites everyone’s voice to be heard.

of reflection about this the most. How can I make a difference with the responsibility I'm holding? It's a question I ask myself every day." Through reading texts with people different than herself, she has become aware of her readerly responsibility. She believes, as do I, that we are meant to be changed by the texts we read, especially novels written by African American women writers who have been historically marginalized, and that change can happen through narrative ethics.

As Booth argues, there is a reciprocal relationship between ethics and politics (*Company* 12). Martha C. Nussbaum claims literature has the ability to influence people's political lives (*Poetic Justice* 2). My study has political implications too because changing individuals changes society. As novels written by African American women intercede in people's lives in a way that transforms them, they walk away from those texts as ethical agents able to influence others. Booth is one of the early contributors to modern ethical criticism, so his articulation of its primary aim is useful: "Ethical criticism attempts to describe the encounters of a story teller's ethos with that of the reader or listener" (*Company* 8). He expands the definition by discussing virtues: "...then ethical criticism will be any effort to show how the virtues of narratives relate to the virtues of selves and societies" (*Company* 11). What he is getting at is that people's beliefs and attitudes affect their interpretation of what they read and how they ultimately respond, and the way a text is written as well as who is writing that text can influence its meaning. When we judge narratives, we are comparing the narrative to all others we have experienced; however, and this is significant, we are giving the narrative the ability to mediate and change our intuition (*Company* 71).

While Booth describes the importance of virtues to ethical criticism, he also notes in the Preface of *The Company We Keep*, that ethical criticism has a temporal element (x). This

assertion supports the use of narrative ethics in my study, for we know that people of color in the United States continue to face racial discrimination and violence to an alarming degree. In the face of such great temporal need, I find tremendous relevance in a narrative ethics approach because, as Booth would say, readers have a responsibility to stories⁷ (*Company* 9). Like Nussbaum, he would argue that we have a responsibility to more, and we fulfill that responsibility to a greater capacity when we engage in closer self-examination (*Company* 166). That readerly responsibility affects the greater culture when readers push their self-examination further into a critical conversation. Booth notes this critical conversation has a reciprocal purpose of “[nourishing] in return those who feed us with their narratives” (*Company* 36). Acknowledging a connection between reader and author leads to James Phelan’s theories on narrative ethics.

Phelan acknowledges a recursive relationship between author, text, and reader and also that real readers can have shared readings (*Living* 19). Phelan separates himself from Booth and Adam Zachary Newton in his central construct of position, claiming a reader’s ethical position arises from an interaction of four ethical situations. He uses position to mean “a concept that combines being placed in and acting from an ethical location” (*Living* 23). It is the latter part of that definition that bears a particular relevance to my study as I believe reading activates readers as ethical agents to act publicly on what they have privately read. Phelan describes the four ethical situations as encompassing characters, narrators, implied authors, and flesh and blood readers (*Living* 23).⁸

⁷ Booth describes a “double edge” of ethical criticism. On one side, readers carry responsibility toward the text and its author. A reader cannot contrive a reading that is not supported by the textual evidence. On the other side, readers have a responsibility for the “ethical value” of their reading, and that demands a public element. Readers are accountable for their reading of a text; it is no longer merely a private affair.

⁸ In *Living to Tell about It*, Phelan describes the four ethical situations at length. Regarding characters, he examines “how they behave and judge others.” The second situation is of narrators and how they relate to “the telling, the told, and to the audience.” He notes that unreliable narration, as can be argued of Zala in *Those Bones Are Not My Child*,

These four ethical situations, with Newton's notion of hermeneutic ethics, form a framework for my study. Newton defines hermeneutic ethics as accountability to which readers are held by acts of reading (18). Combining Newton's hermeneutic ethics with Phelan's concept of position shows why Phelan's fourth ethical situation is key to my analysis. Phelan's focus is on readers' ethical relation to characters, narrators, and implied authors. I shape my analysis of each novel around one of Phelan's ethical situations and readers' relation to it, including the hermeneutical perspective of how it prompts them to take action as an ethical agent. My analysis of Morrison's *Song of Solomon* centers on four of the main characters. My analysis of Walker's *Meridian* centers on the way in which Walker as implied author drives the narrative structure, affecting readers' perception of *Meridian*'s non-violent approach. Finally, my analysis of Bambara's *Those Bones Are Not My Child* centers around the way in which Zala as an unreliable narrator affects the structure of the text and the way in which the parents' coalition is characterized. These ethical situations are the focus of my chapters as I apply the critical approaches: narrative ethics, feminist ethics of care, and coalitional politics. The remainder of this introduction provides brief summaries of the chapters.

In the first chapter, I examine Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) through a narrative ethics lens. I show how *Song of Solomon* can be read through themes of retribution and redemption. In *Song of Solomon*, the vengeful Seven Days group enacts violence against whites in retaliation for whites' violence against blacks. There is overlap of violence and community relations, and my study will explore the ethics of community-sanctioned violence for the sake of

prompts a different ethical position than a story told with reliable narration. The third situation is of an implied author and their relation to the aforementioned. He claims implied authors employ a narrative strategy that affects readers' ethical response. Finally, Phelan describes the fourth ethical situation concerning flesh and blood readers as related to the "set of values, beliefs, and locations operating in situations 1-3" (23).

the community while arguing that literature can serve as an intercessor that moves people through violence so they do not enact it themselves.

In the second chapter, I analyze Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) through narrative ethics and feminist ethics of care. Particularly in this era, violent measures of resistance were pitted against nonviolent ones, and my textual analysis of *Meridian* illuminates that tension. The title character, Meridian Hill, provides a provocative contrast to violent black revolutionaries, for while both are committed to the cause of Civil Rights, Meridian cannot bring herself to verbally commit to killing for the Revolution.

In the final chapter of this project, I analyze a contemporary novel that interrogates racial injustice, showcasing a female character who becomes powerful and dares to question the powers that be: Toni Cade Bambara's posthumously published, *Those Bones Are Not My Child: A Novel* (1999). Based on true events that happened in Atlanta between the summer of 1979 and the spring of 1981, Toni Cade Bambara's *Those Bones* traces these tragic events in "The City Too Busy to Hate." While Atlanta, with its newly elected black mayor, is basking in the trappings of progressiveness, racial injustice prevails as poor, black (mostly male) children and adults continue to go missing and be killed. As in our current day, police officers and politicians seem to need to be reminded that "black lives matter." Bambara's text takes on a community-wide indictment of indifference to racial injustice. This novel grapples with morality in the midst of injustice, and with its themes of self-empowerment and collective agency, it provides an excellent basis for a discussion of how to face racial violence without enacting it. In this final body chapter, I analyze the texts using narrative ethics and feminist ethics of care in addition to coalitional politics.

As I turn to the theoretical framework, I want the end to be in mind. My conclusion begins with an analysis of goodness as Toni Morrison defines it in her Ingersoll Lecture at Harvard Divinity School in 2012: “Goodness: Altruism and the Literary Imagination.” For literature to truly intercede and be the conduit that moves people through violence and retribution, people have to see themselves as ethical agents, connected and accountable to others. Thus, I ultimately end with an argument for contemporary readers to raise their own consciousness and fight injustice and the established order with interdependence.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To trace the way literature functions as an intercessor, allowing individuals to move through violence and retribution without enacting actual violence and retribution, I employ three critical approaches: narrative ethics, feminist ethics of care, and coalitional politics. I analyze three novels written by African American women authors to see why their characters choose violence and how justice would be different if the characters were not bound to violence and retribution. Answering those questions affects readers' own sense of justice and what options they have for action beyond meeting violence with violence.

I draw on hermeneutic narrative ethics from a feminist standpoint to show how literature written by black women writers can be an intercession against hate in the world, creating a common memory where one does not exist based on life experiences and material conditions of life. On a basic level, narrative ethics is concerned with the crossroads between stories and moral values; this method allows readers and critics to question how one (author, character, narrator, or reader) should respond ethically for the greater good. Since I am examining novels by black women writers historically—Jim Crow Era, Civil Rights Movement, and Contemporary—I situate these texts in their historical and cultural context and show how narrative ethics allows readers to interrogate how racial violence can be avoided.

In addition to analyzing texts using narrative ethics, I use feminist ethics of care and coalition politics to further show how reading about violence and retribution can assuage the need for actual violence and retribution. I challenge Marvin Henberg's claim that evil must always be requited with evil, showing that coalitions are a way to diffuse the need for violence

and vengeance. Dana Medoro's description of a justice system that is a "balance of responsibility," as seen in Toni Morrison's character, Pilate, in *Song of Solomon*, is closer to my sense of justice in acknowledging suffering and showing how coalitions reduce the isolation and hostility that often births violence and retribution.

I build upon the previous theoretical approach in each of my chapters on the novels, using a scaffold approach. I begin with an examination of *Song of Solomon* from a hermeneutical ethical lens to offer a unique reading of the text. In my second novel chapter, I employ feminist ethics of care principles to help explain both Meridian Hill's nonconformity and the efficacy of her nonviolent approach in the face of violence and injustice. Finally, the third novel chapter uses the previous approaches but also draws on coalitional politics to better understand Zala's character in *Those Bones Are Not My Child* and what we as contemporary readers can do when we feel paralyzed to act in the face of oppressive systems of injustice. It is important to examine the three theoretical approaches at length before applying them in the subsequent chapters.

As my purpose indicates, I am scaffolding theoretical approaches to show how literature can be a useful tool in transforming a violent society. In this theoretical framework, I begin by discussing narrative ethics because this study focuses on how the literature affects the reader, namely, how the reader can move through violence without enacting it. The literature on narrative ethics suggests an approach in which an author creates a rhetorical situation whereby readers question their own motives and interests as they reconstruct the meaning of a text by interrogating gaps and indeterminacies. With its focus on narrative as cure, narrative ethics pairs with ethics of care, so after discussing the pertinent literature on narrative ethics, I move to the literature on retribution and how an ethics of care provides an alternative to traditional systems of justice that can promote cyclical violence. Since ethics of care focuses on interdependence of people and

posits that individualism and isolation are reasons for problematic behavior, that methodology naturally builds to a discussion of coalitions and how they are a conduit that supports an ethics of care, allowing members to bridge differences toward a common goal—in this case, it is the avoidance of violence in light of racial injustice. Through a review of literature on coalitional politics, I discuss identity politics, intersectionality, power structures, and costs and goals involved in coalitional work. Ultimately, I use this literature to show how coalitional work can transform individuals by no longer excluding them and perpetuating their supposed need for violence and retribution. Literature, particularly *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, reflects the need for coalitional work as a galvanizing force that empowers both fictional characters and real people. When a group can speak and act toward a common goal, it mitigates the powerlessness that comes from isolation and the desperation that leads to retributive violence. Though hegemonic structures have kept marginalized individuals invisible, this praxis makes people of color and their various needs visible.

Hermeneutic Narrative Ethics

Defining the Approach

As Newton explains, narrative ethics is a reciprocal theory that questions how ethics are embedded in a work's structure and the ethics the discourse exposes (8). Jens Erik Paulsen makes a direct connection between narrative and ethics of care, saying that a narrative ethics of care allows for the traditional tenets of ethics of care—"nature of relationships, attentiveness, and understanding particular others"—but combines those tenets with a narrative of working through moral problems (par. 1). Though usually used to discuss ethics in the medical realm, Booth and Nussbaum's humanist ethics work in the 1980's laid the groundwork for Newton's work in the literary analysis realm. Applying narrative ethics to literature is a way to analyze ethics and

justice, interrogating the ways in which literature helps people make sense of life. For this study, I am using narrative ethics to discern how readers are positioned as ethical agents for whom the text serves as an intercessor that allows them to move through violence without actually enacting violence.

Narrative ethics relies on a narrative approach, which according to Paulsen involves contextualizing the situation by examining “master narratives” (par. 10). While this term might sound alarm bells for critics who have seen it over-used, Paulsen argues that it can help account for the problems presented in those “master narratives,” to acknowledge the multiple ways those problems can be interpreted and answered. For my study, “master narratives” are retributive violence and racism. After examining “master narratives,” Paulsen recommends analyzing the core narrative, which involves looking at what he calls “the intentional,” or what is said overtly; “the symptomatic,” or what is not said; and “the adaptive,” or imagining what else could have been said or done (par. 19). After the adaptive reading, which alters the text to imagine other possibilities, the approach moves to closure. Closure suggests alternative endings or actions, which I argue empower readers as ethical agents because even though the term is “closure,” it is opening ethical decisions beyond a prescriptive moral directive. Narrative ethics does not try to solve a problem. It opens the text and questions the phenomenological implications (Newton 11). In response to reading, readers must choose to act, or not act. Of course, as Paulsen points out, for readers to imagine other possible endings, they must question their motives (par. 34). Attending to motives helps readers see not just what is identified as a gap or how it should be read, but also how readers came to notice the gap at all.

Role of Reflexivity

Noticing gaps and making conjectures about indeterminacies in a text are tasks that demand a reader be reflexive. In *Eloquent Reticence: Withholding Information in Fictional Narrative*, Leona Toker argues the key to opening other analyses is asking the “so what” question, and the answer to that question says as much about the reader as it does about the text. As Toker notes, the narrative creates conditions in which the readers enter the text as moral agents. Readers do not experience a text only in terms of content but also genre and style, and these choices affect readers’ ethical responses. General narratology questions the structures and function of narratives, meaning the story is more than what happens; the story is also comprised of the indices that create the mood and psychological effect of the piece. The audience processes both what happens in the story and also what is left out (Toker 3). Reflexivity, then, is significant to readers’ processing of a text because it encourages readers to question their own biases, privilege, and interests.

Although *Eloquent Reticence* is not an overtly feminist text, Toker discusses feminist principles such as reflexivity and consciousness-raising as by-products of parallel experience. In parallel experience, readers are intellectually inserted into a text, and differences between readers and characters are subordinated so readers can see the cognitive parallels between characters and themselves. As an interpretative strategy, parallel experience gives readers insights as they question how to reconstruct the text. Toker believes gaps in the text act as mirrors to the audience, showing what a latent reading says about the reader (5). Examining oneself through one’s interpretation of the text not only reveals patterns of the text but also patterns of life. How one reads gaps and indeterminacies speaks to one’s formulations of narratives and attitudes toward those narratives; however, as seen in the following section, not all critics buy into this method of literary analysis.

Defending Narrative Ethics

Prolific ethical critics such as Booth and Nussbaum have published scholarly pieces in defense of ethical criticism, and for them to do so means a defense was necessary. Richard Posner has critiqued ethical criticism, saying there is no place for ethical judgments in literary or aesthetic criticism. Others think ethical readings can never be textually substantiated. Nussbaum recognizes novelists as ethical and political beings who can affect readers' morality as, through reading, readers confront themselves and their effect on others' lives (343). Nussbaum perceives writing as an ethical act, saying, "When we follow [the acts] as attentive readers, we ourselves engage in ethical conduct, and our readings themselves are assessable ethical acts" (344); therefore, the act of writing is one with ethical responsibilities, and readers reciprocate through a response that questions their own attitudes and actions. At the same time a narrative is an ethical performance rather than a straightforward prescription, reading is as well.

This juncture of moral prescription and ethical grappling is where Newton's work on narrative ethics advances literary analysis in a crucial way. Ethical criticism has to be more than a way to enforce "moral recourse" (Newton 9). For Newton, narrative offers readers more than a moral proposition: narrative is an exposing of oneself in a way that is an ethical performance, and it "exacts a 'price'" from readers in the form of an ethical confrontation (3-4). This perspective is useful to my study because I am arguing that reading necessitates action, but that action is socially constructive rather than violently destructive. In the final section on narrative ethics, I describe Newton's structure and how I plan to use it in my study.

Structure and Application

Instead of trying to solve a problem, narrative ethics opens the text so readers can "confront the claims" and choose their responses (Newton 11). The goal is neither to deconstruct

the text nor to simply consider what the text says in a formalist manner; instead, the goal is to make oneself accountable to the transformative power of narrative as ethics (Newton 7).

Transformation is available to those who choose it, but it is important to analyze the structure that makes that choice possible.

Newton relies on what he calls the triadic structure of narrative ethics, and this structure is more helpful to my study than traditional narratology because of the emphasis on the concrete as well as the responsibilities demanded of readers. The first part of the triad is a narrational ethics, which is what needs to be immediately dealt with in the text, both conditions of the text and its consequences. In this first part of narrative ethics, Newton is acknowledging the “dialogic system of exchanges” between narrator and reader. Narrational ethics speaks to the responsibility a text prompts for the reader (18). The second is a representational ethics which examines the “costs incurred in fictionalizing oneself or others by exchanging ‘person’ for ‘character.’” By “cost,” Newton is referring to risks taken and that which might be gained or lost by having a character represent a person. This second part of the triad of narrative ethics acknowledges the expanse between person and character. Whether small or large, this distance has an effect when someone is standing in for another (18). Finally, the triad is completed by a hermeneutic ethics, which is most applicable to my study.

Hermeneutic ethics is “the ethico-critical accountability which acts of reading hold their readers to” (18). Furthermore, hermeneutic ethics is about ethical responsibility readers absorb as they read others and themselves in a text (25). I am relying on hermeneutic ethics because I place so much on the reader reflexively reading and acting, so it is essential for me to emphasize the structure that makes readers accountable. This accountability is manifested internally and externally. Newton suggests readers have private and public responsibilities involved with

reading (19). Privately, readers read and question themselves, but then publically, how they communicate the message to others is also an ethical performance for which the text has made them accountable. Both are necessary for readers to be empowered ethical agents.

My study pairs narrative ethics with feminist ethics of care because I seek to expose the ways ethics has the tendency to operate paternalistically and furthermore how that paternalistic system traps people in a cycle of retributive violence rather than an order that allows for a system of care. The way Newton describes the connection between narrative and ethics complements the way I envision ethics and care working together: “The ‘logic’ which binds narrative and ethics, then, is really a pragmatics, implying an interactive rather than a legislative order, a diachrony across the temporal world of the text and the real time of reading” (13). Readers as ethical agents enact this interactive order through first the act of reading and secondly how they follow reading with care acted out in the world. Reading in light of narrative ethics and ethics of care makes readers more accountable to develop, as Nussbaum would say, “an ability to miss less, to be responsible to more” (189). As Newton points out, literature is not a lab in which one observes life. Observation makes for passive existence, and literature instead invites ethical grappling (57).

Retribution: Traditional Justice versus Feminist Ethics of Care

Insufficient Justice

Violence and retribution are common themes in postmodern American literature. In *Retribution: Evil for Evil*, Marvin Henberg explores the retributionist’s connection to suffering. Henberg claims there is a need to repay evil for evil, and retributionists try to find a reason for suffering. In people’s attempt to avenge wrongs, suffering “serves as the currency.” Although Henberg believes that people always requite evil with evil, I argue that ultimately coalitions are a way to diffuse the need for vengeance.

The retributionist's need to find a reason for suffering is often compounded by a sense of isolation. Henberg claims that when people feel as if civic authorities have failed them, they feel isolated and see no alternative other than to act, righting wrongs according to a sense of retributive justice. Guitar Bains, in Toni Morrison's novel, *Song of Solomon*, is an example of a poor, black male who is isolated and failed by civic authorities. Along with the Seven Days men, he feels justified in murdering whites for the atrocities they have committed against blacks. Even though the novel was published in 1977, it is set in the early 1930s to the 1960s, a notoriously tumultuous time for African Americans in the United States. Reconstruction has long since failed, and the Civil Rights and Voting Acts are not a reality until the latter half of the novel's setting. Guitar's sense of justice, then, is "eye-for-an-eye," but it is not akin to Pilate's system of justice. In writing on justice in *Song of Solomon*, Dana Medoro notes that Pilate's system is "beyond necessity of force or retribution" (10). Medoro further says that Pilate advocates a balance of responsibility; she aims to love wider. Civic authorities, however, are not practicing that same balance of responsibility, which produces a system that fails to protect African Americans or redress wrongs whites commit. If Guitar and the Seven Days men had support from civic authorities, the need to kill whites would have decreased because they would not have been isolated and relegated to a low place in society, feeling as if the only justice they could receive was what they forged themselves.

The Power of Care

Isolation occurs where interdependence is absent, and although there are different schools of thought concerning ethics of care, the major theorists in feminist ethics of care agree on the relational quality of the theory and praxis. Whereas Carol Gilligan emphasizes the importance of everyone having an equal voice, Virginia Held stresses relationships and comprehensive values

based on experience, and Joan Tronto highlights democracy and the implications of how people give and receive care, their work all points to the notion of interdependence instead of individualism. The remainder of this section highlights major feminist ethics of care theorists before the final care section on connected knowing ends with a direct tie to *Meridian* through Patricia Hill Collins' "Black Feminist Epistemology."

In her introduction to *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, Virginia Held establishes care as an alternative ethic, noting its value in addressing issues through interdependence rather than individualism and empathy rather than strict rationality (1). She demands legitimate consideration for care as an alternative ethic,⁹ for whereas justice sets the "moral minimum," care operates at a higher standard (3). Notable foremothers in feminist ethics of care began an argument for its value as an alternative to the Rawlsian or Kohlbergian definition of justice and moral development in the 1980s.

In *Caring: A Feminine Approaches to Ethics and Moral Education*, Nel Noddings affirms the practicality of an ethic of caring, noting that it is not situational or Christian ethics but is instead based on human love (28-29). Noddings distinguishes natural caring from ethical caring, saying that ethical caring relies on natural caring but also requires more effort and an overt response (80). The goal of caring, according to Noddings, is not judgment but "heightened moral perception and sensitivity" (89). This distinction is useful to my project because literature cannot force a reluctant reader to judgment but opens a space for raised-consciousness and transformation.

⁹ Alison M. Jagger also makes the claim that care should be recognized as an alternative form of moral reasoning (179). She also argues that care reasoning is relational, contextual, reflexive, and engages emotions. Jagger believes it is important to see how justice and care can complement one another. Jagger also asserts care's need to be consciousness-raising, and my work aligns with hers concerning the need for individuals to be ethical agents. As Jagger contends, "[Care] reminds us not only that a new society needs new people to make it work but that social change requires individual action and challenges each of us to act now rather than wait for the authorities or the revolution" (196).

Carol Gilligan is another leading feminist care ethicist who speaks into the process of ethical transformation through use of a different voice. The crux of her piece, “Moral Orientation and Moral Development,” juxtaposes justice and care. She posits that justice and care are “different ways of organizing the basic elements of moral judgment: self, others, and the relationship between them” (34). When acting from an organizing framework that prioritizes care, people are focused on attachment or detachment rather than equality or inequality as when focused on justice, and people’s organizing framework affects how they operate as ethical agents. Ultimately, Gilligan is arguing for a reconsideration of how the terms “justice” and “care” are conceived (43-44). The law and order sense of justice, as noted earlier in this theoretical framework, favors a male-centered approach. Instead of such a limited view, Gilligan believes care opens a new perspective, a new voice for moral development that derives from the context of relationships.¹⁰ As I argue in my second chapter, Meridian Hill manifests that different voice of which Gilligan writes as she extends informed care as a civil rights worker.

Joan C. Tronto’s “Women and Caring: What Can Feminists Learn about Morality from Caring?” adds to the definition of care as she delineates the difference between caring about and caring for. Tronto claims that care implies a commitment and a relationship, and that when one is caring for, it involves a moral activity whereas caring about may not. As Tronto says, “Thus, what typically makes ‘caring for’ perceived as moral is not the activity per se but how that activity reflects upon the assigned social duties of the caretaker and who is doing the assigning” (104). In this way, context is supremely important as people consider how society shapes expectations and allows hegemony to wield power. Tronto suggests people expand how they conceptualize caring

¹⁰ It is worth noting that other care ethicists critique Gilligan, claiming her view of justice is myopic and does not acknowledge positive rights. Marilyn Friedman is one such critic and argues that people need both care and justice to get the whole picture of interpersonal relationships (70).

for others, looking at the moral, social, and political implications (112). Virginia Held's work seems to build on Tronto's as Held brings conceptualization of care into lived moral experience.

In "Feminist Moral Inquiry and the Feminist Future," Held claims that moral inquiry involves both theory and praxis (153). Moral experience must be real and applicable, not just an observation but action. This is one reason Meridian Hill is an ideal ethical agent, for she lives out her ethic of care. One of Held's major claims in this piece is the value of emotions and actual experience to moral inquiry (157, 159). These are often undervalued in nonfeminist conceptions of justice and moral inquiry. Ultimately, Held would like to see "feminist moral inquiry and feminist culture reshape the organization of society" (173). Indeed, this reordering would have a monumental influence on theories, practices, and epistemologies, as will be discussed in the following section on care.

Connected Knowing and Care

Patricia Hill Collins is a preeminent scholar in sociology and black feminist thought. Her groundbreaking chapter, "Black Feminist Epistemology," in *Black Feminist Thought* is useful to my theoretical framework for its definition and validation of ethics of caring and personal accountability. As noted, conversations around ethics and justice often focus on male-centered perspectives, so it is useful for Hill Collins' piece that details black feminist epistemology to validate "personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy" as significant ways of knowing (282). Hill Collins draws on Belenky, et al. to give precedence to connected knowing, arguing that it is through this epistemology that "truth emerges through care" (283). This adage is accurate for Meridian Hill, for as she faces the truth about herself, she refines her ability to care.

Hill Collins makes another point about black feminist epistemology and the ethics of caring that has a concrete connection to *Meridian*, and that is the influence of the black church

(283-84). She identifies the black church as a social institution which has the potential to validate black women's emotions and expressiveness, and readers find this to be true with Meridian as well. I will explore this scene fully in my second chapter, but Meridian is at a church service shortly after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death when she experiences a revelation about the militancy of worship. Galvanized by the speaker and music, Meridian feels for the first time that she might be able to kill for the Revolution. She feels free in this protected space to express her rage and grief, the full range of her emotions.

In addition to ethics of caring, Hill Collins identifies the ethic of personal accountability as part of black feminist epistemology, arguing that people's knowledge claims are linked to their "character, values, and ethics" (284). Meridian Hill's involvement with the Movement activates her as an ethical agent, and she fits Hill Collins' description of an "outsider-within" (287). As this type of knowledge agent, Meridian operates within social institutions like Saxon College, but she never truly fits because her values and ethics are at odds with the institutions' values and ethics. By outward appearances, she can pass, but inwardly, she is battling a war. As Hill Collins says, "But while such women can make substantial contributions as agents of knowledge, they rarely do so without substantial personal cost" (287). Taking up personal accountability and an ethic of care paralyzes Meridian, and even when she eventually learns how to balance care with her own well-being, she does it knowing she will always be an outsider. While Meridian is effective in her isolated fight for justice through non-violence and care, most people's efforts are strengthened when they can join forces with like-minded people, which leads to the final section of this theoretical framework.

Coalitions and Safe Spaces

Although Marvin Henberg believes it is impossible to always avoid requiring evil with evil, I contend that coalitions are a way to reduce the need for retributive justice. I believe in coalitions' ability to bridge political and social disparities. As Bernice Johnson Reagon notes, coalition work is done on the streets. It is not accomplished safely in someone's living room because lives are at stake. If coalitions collaborated with civic authorities, Guitar and the Seven Days men in *Song of Solomon* would not have had to carve out their own sense of justice. If civic authorities worked with the parents in *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, it is possible that the perpetrator(s) would have been caught sooner before more children went missing or were murdered. Not being taken seriously is what causes Zala to coordinate independent investigations, stake-outs, and a face-to-face confrontation with the man she believes kidnapped and abused Sonny. Coalitions affect the need for vengeance because they empower people who are otherwise drowned in their need for retributive justice.

Anyone writing about coalitions after the early 1980s gives at least slight recognition to Bernice Johnson Reagon; her speech at the West Coast Women's Music Festival in 1981 has become a germinal work on coalitional politics. She is often quoted for describing the difficulty of working in coalitions, saying if you're doing it right, it is going to feel like you're threatened and dying (343). She says, "The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive" (343). Continuing the idea of coalitional work as survival, she sets up a metaphor of a barred room where one can gather with people like him or her and stay alive, but she also notes that this retreat is only temporary—for one cannot stay alive by remaining inside that barred

room (345). The barred room is good to feel temporarily nurtured and work out notions of identity and power, but eventually coalition work must be done across lines of difference.

In this study, I am working from Elizabeth R. Cole and Zakiya T. Luna's definition of a coalition: "The process through which groups that define themselves as different work together politically, either long or short term, in the service of some mutually valued end" (71). In coalitions, oppression is not viewed as a stigma but as a possible place for connection (Cole and Luna 85). The idea of forging connection in the midst of oppression frames one my aforementioned research questions for this project; namely, what role can coalitions play in curbing the need for retributive violence? I begin by discussing identity because, as an organizing principle of coalitions, it troubles many notable theorists such as Judith Butler, Chandra Mohanty, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, for as a foundational principle, attention to identity alone has a tendency to elide differences.

From the outset, it is important to recognize that identity-based groups differ from coalitions and why coalitions have to guard against becoming paralyzed by ignoring intragroup differences rather than taking them on. In the interest of building community, characters and readers alike fight essentialized identity and embrace multiple identities, and I discuss this need in the following first section of the literature on coalitions. In *Those Bones*, the people fighting the official narrative were not just black mothers, as is so often thought. The members of STOP, representing multiple identities, had to forge a community and work together. Building community is essential to liberation and shared action, so in the second section of the literature review on coalitions, I show how to build communities in places that are not safe. The setting of *Those Bones* is tragically not a safe place, which intensifies the need for action. A perennial theme in scholarship on coalitions is traversing lines of difference to forge connections, so my

third section of the literature review deals with difference and how it strengthens rather than divides coalitions. Closely related to difference is the notion of intersectionality, or recognizing interrelated systems of oppression. In the fourth section, I illustrate how intersectionality allows people in coalitions to exist as whole people rather than fragmented selves. In the penultimate section, I acknowledge the costs involved in coalitional work and the subsequent goals that can be achieved if one is willing to accept those costs. I conclude the final section by discussing power structures in coalitions and how they can be harnessed to keep power differentials in check, thereby more equally distributing power to all members of the coalition.

Identity Politics and Multiple Identities

Coalitional work is fraught with difficulties, mostly because they are made up of people—people who do not neatly fit into prescribed social categories. Martha Ackelsberg, Professor of Government, notes women of color writers often claim “woman” cannot be separated from her particular location, “historical, class, ethnic, religious, etc.” (89), which makes the case for recognizing multiple identities. This is also at the heart of preeminent scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s, arguments about intersectionality: the most vulnerable fall through the cracks when the effect of interlocking systems of oppressors is ignored (1275). People cannot feel part of a group when lumped together under one empty signifier that ignores the other parts of their identity. In *Those Bones*, Zala Spencer is a poor, black mother, but for her to be lumped together with other parents ignores her lived reality and multiple identities. Essentially, as Ackelsberg further states, identity is “unstable and problematic” as a means for analysis and should not be separated from politics. Acknowledging identity and politics creates room for alliances because people are not pegged into singular identity markers as might happen in identity-based groups (90). Drawing on Reagon, Anne Carastathis points out the difference

between identity-based groups and coalitions: identity-based groups enjoy a sheltered, homogenous existence as opposed to coalitions, which are spaces of “difference, confrontation, and risk” (944). This claim shows that coalitions are not comfortable places, but they are ones in which people can express multiplicity.

Coalitions exist as a place in which people do not have to hide part of themselves to fit. In coalitions, there is no single analysis of oppression, for that would require repressing or subordinating parts of the self to fit a group (Ackelsberg 90). In these spaces, people are able to work from multiple identities, not the one hegemony would most value. Edwina Barvosa-Carter, Professor of Ethnic Studies, affirms the point of building coalitions from multiple identities, for that increases the possible connections people can make, ideally building community and political alliances (111). Barvosa-Carter clarifies her use of the term multiple identities: “Identity [is] a set of qualities that define each person as a specific human being. These sets of qualities are large, diverse, and contain subsets of qualities that form different identities—multiple identities—that stand within an overarching identity” (112). Barvosa-Carter’s definition speaks to identity as something that is fluid, depending on situational and relational contexts, which often reveals the politicized self (113). The parents in *Those Bones* become more politicized as they are implicated in their children’s disappearances and as they are systemically stopped in their investigative progress so as not to embarrass law enforcement who could neither solve nor stop the murders. In sum, identity and politics are interdependent and must be examined together in a study of coalitional politics.

Identity and politics are linked because as we alter our identities, our political agendas will also change and develop. Flexibility is the political goal as people fully explore and live out multiple identities without subordinating parts of themselves (Ackelsberg 97). As Barvosa-Carter

claims, “The fluidity and change that accompany the durability of multiple identity means that the relationship between multiple identity and politics transcends ‘identity politics’ by denying that specific identity frames are an essential aspect of the self” (123). By not getting caught up in an essentialized self, members of coalitions can act from multiple identities, thereby enlarging their sphere of influence.

From Marginalization to Liberated Community

Multiple identities converge to form communities that can lead to liberation. To avoid the trap of marginalization or perpetuation of hegemonic norms, Audre Lorde says people must acknowledge differences to build community, and “Without community there is no liberation...” (112). Carastathis would add that liberation happens by traversing lines of difference (944). If communities were easy to construct, people would not resist them; however, it is safer to live as a community of one. Throughout *Those Bones*, we see Zala retreat into a world of isolation as her children live with their father. She is literally unable to function, obsessively working to find Sonny. While it is possible to live as a community of one, it is impossible to forge a coalition of one. As Bambara says in the Prologue of *Those Bones*, “Everyone would have dropped everything to find a missing child, for when mumps have been replaced by murder, alarm is no longer a private affair” (9). Since coalitions are necessary but difficult to form and function, it is important to examine what blocks community so that one can take the necessary step of moving outside individual comfort and hegemonic norms to work in coalition.

Ackelsberg claims that community breaks down if members do not go past marginalizing people who do not fit norms (88). Joseph A. Marchal, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, compounds this problem by saying community also must not perpetuate or create new norms that will further marginalize (160). Cole and Luna claim that Judith Butler and Chandra Mohanty’s

theories about coalition fit here because they counter identity as an organizing principle of coalition for the reason that it can lead to the “reification and normalization of certain identities” (75). Liberation occurs in heterogeneous communities. Without demanding full commonalities, coalitional communities acknowledge epistemological differences toward a shared vision—in this case, it is a shared vision of a transformation where retributive violence can be avoided.

Traversing Lines of Difference

As discussed in the first section on multiple identities and identity politics, coalitions work effectively by recognizing members’ multiple identities. This implies that people approach coalitional work from different races, ages, abilities, gender identities, classes, and sexes. The literature overwhelmingly shows that coalitions function out of visible differences. This is why I am fascinated by the coalitions forged in *Those Bones*. In the novel, Mrs. Webber provides the space for Zala, Spence, Delia, and the others to organize their efforts—it is unprecedented during this horrific event for a wealthy woman, the wife of a judge, to join forces with the poor black parents to fight injustice. As Reagon notes, differences show up when someone enters a coalition who is perhaps a woman but is also someone else. That is when the multiplicity of someone’s identity is revealed (348). In the beginning of her article, Ackelsberg critiques second wave feminism for not acknowledging difference, particularly of Jewish women, women of color, and lesbians. Lumped together as women, their differences of class, sexuality, and culture were made invisible (88).

Rendering people invisible implies that members will ignore differences. As Lorde says, “Refusing to recognize difference makes it impossible to see the different problems and pitfalls facing us as women” (Lorde 118). Carastathis contends we must acknowledge intragroup differences (945), and Cole echoes the same idea (445). In coalitions, members must counter

essentialism and “single-axis conceptions of identity” (Carastathis 946). Coalitions are places of multiplicity where intersectionality is recognized, not places where everyone is always already defined in a myopic way. Barvosa-Carter contends that multiple identities give more access points to coalition. She claims, “By foregrounding one axis of their identities for the purposes of political mobilization, they did not, however, eliminate other identities or the differences they represented” (120). Carastathis also argues to avoid ignoring differences in groups, adding that coalitions work better than homogenous groups because people are not required to ignore part of their identity to participate (941-42).

Ignoring differences creates a sense of false universals, as if all members do or should identify one way or feel one way about an issue. To be effective, coalitions must move from false universals to acknowledging difference if they intend on shared action. Lorde issues a warning about how women’s coalitional power is weakened if they rely on false universals: “Ignoring those differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women’s joint power” (117). Lorde is adamant that differences are not problematic; instead, people are separated from one another because people misname these differences or do not recognize them, thus not acknowledging the damage done to women’s empowerment when we set false universals (115). Cole says the way to avoid creating false universals from dominant groups is to represent subordinate groups in social categories (450). Cole and Luna also say the goal is not “false unity but shared commitment” (95). To reach that shared commitment, coalitions cannot elide differences under falsely unifying rhetoric like “sisterhood” (Carastathis 955). Adopting false universals strips power from people who do not fit the mythical norm Lorde describes. To be effective, coalitions cannot rely on false universals, or shared action will be impossible.

Weighing the Costs of Coalitional Work

Given Reagon's comparison of coalition work to dying if one is doing it right, it is not surprising that reaching shared action through coalitional work does not come without costs. Indeed, in *Those Bones*, doing coalitional work nearly cost Zala her sanity and custodial rights to her children. Karen Sánchez-Eppler, Professor of American Studies and English, urges that self-criticism is necessary; one must admit and work through blind spots (324-25). Some of those costs are to the individual and others affect whole groups in coalition. Ackelsberg says members must go beyond the individualistic to see a gain for all (96). This perspective invites the multiplicity of which Barvosa-Carter writes; however, this is a major challenge because it is usually unnatural for people to willingly give up power or privilege for someone else's benefit. Coalitional work requires compromise, and that can be a deal-breaker when one moves from the idea of coalitional work to actually doing it. Another cost is relinquishing insularity. As María Lugones notes, coalitions are difficult because they force people to move beyond their safe circle toward other "resistant" allies (76). Too often, scholars like Hill Collins write about "safe spaces" and the work that is done in those spaces to reject dominant ideology that regards them as Other (111); however, they do not bring these "safe spaces" out of a place of separatism. True coalitional work is not done in insular, homogenous groups even though these groups are useful in providing necessary safe spaces for people across differences who have been historically marginalized and need to be free to engage in dialogue without free of further violation or harm for being the "Other." Rather coalitions do not have the luxury to work with whom they want, and this means they have to weather internal tensions. Cole and Luna note that sometimes internal cohesion is compromised by divisions that stem from unequal power differentials and

“disparate ideology” (86). This is why flexibility is such an important goal for coalitions. A fluid ideology allows issues to be framed in a way that fits more people.

Goals for Effective Coalitions

Coalitions need to strive for certain goals to be effective. Certainly, the obvious goal for the parents in *Those Bones* is to apprehend the perpetrator and keep the children safe. Coalitions should build up both the individual and the group; therefore, synergism is a goal (Barvosa-Carter 118). Synergism will lead to action; to this end, Lugones says coalitions must make use of a liminal space, not as a retreat from dominating power structures, but as a place where a new construction of identity is possible because of shared action (76). In that liminal space, coalitions should embrace an “openness to learn each other’s meaning” (Lugones 84). This openness reiterates a similar goal of thoughtful resourcefulness. As Cole and Luna illustrate through their interviews with professionals, coalitions need to find a way to proceed, not expect the way it works in one community to work once others come together (92). A willingness to change, problem solve, and collaborate is essential to a coalition’s effectiveness.

Talk of openness, synergy, and balance should not overshadow the fact that coalitions’ goals also have to reflect the hard work it takes for one to be effective; therefore, one goal is to allow tensions in intersectional, coalitional work. As Marchal states, “...even among similarly committed feminists, there can be conflict and dissent, differences and disagreements” (161). When doing the life-threatening work of coalitions, there will occasionally be sore feelings (161). That is hardly a reason to give up. The parents in *Those Bones* disagree about methods and interpretation of clues, but they must work through disagreements if they have any hope of finding their children. Barvosa-Carter would say multiplicity can temper tensions in coalitional relations because members can be flexible in their positionality in the group (119). One benefit

in welcoming tensions is the opportunity for growth. As Carastathis says, “The embrace of others enables us to embrace parts of ourselves that have been derided, denied, and diminished” (Carastathis 957). This is the primary goal for individuals working in coalition: forge connections for wholeness of self so one is not continually divided by disparate parts of one’s identity (960). Understanding of self through work in a coalition means one is able to take on systems and structures of oppression and the walls they erect (Carastathis 959-60). During that difficult work, a coalition might be threatened, but the members stick together out of necessity (Sanchez-Eppler 328). Let us be reminded of Reagon’s opening words that the ultimate goal of coalitions is survival, which takes on a stark reality when we are talking about the lives of missing children. We cannot sigh in relief knowing that the mass murders of 1979-1981 have stopped; as readers, we are called to action because we know that racial violence persists and those most vulnerable are also most systematically oppressed and therefore least likely to be able to intervene.

Power Structures for Collective Action

As noted earlier, coalitions cannot elide differences, but to function effectively, they also must recognize the role of power structures inside and outside the coalition. Cole, who says alliances are built not assumed, also says they are formed not on similarities but through “shared marginalization in relation to power” (447). There is a binding goal in coalition work: dismantle oppressive structures. But power differentials must be recognized and deconstructed (447). In fact, it is the responsibility of coalition members to think through practices and policies that will distribute power amongst members (Cole 448). This distribution often boils down to the one with more hegemonic power willingly taking less power (448). More privileged members need to take more risks in the group, intentionally making themselves less comfortable (Cole 448). For this

study, that means that white readers have to own up to privilege and be willing to relinquish it in order for others to move through violence and retribution without enacting it.

CHAPTER ONE:

A RESPONSIBILITY TO MERCY

As Toni Morrison notes in her foreword to *Song of Solomon*, mercy is the “unspoken wish of the novel’s population” (xiii). This assertion fascinates me because it makes me ponder from where the characters believe mercy could come. The novel does not contain scenes that lead readers to believe the characters would think mercy would come from a higher being. If mercy is not coming from a higher being, then the source must be fellow characters and, as I argue, readers. *Song of Solomon* invites readers to answer this plea for mercy in an attempt to bring redemption rather than retributive violence to their fictional community and our tangible one. As readers extend mercy, they are responsible to the text as ethical agents. In this chapter, I show how *Song of Solomon* can be read through themes of retribution and redemption when readers examine characters through a hermeneutical narrative ethics lens. Since the novel’s historical setting is significant to its themes, it is useful to first place the setting in context before turning to a discussion of justice and hermeneutical ethics and analysis of the novel.

Jim Crow in Context

Song of Solomon spans a long portion of time, mostly between 1931 and 1963; however, there are flashbacks to the nineteenth century. In a video interview with The National Visionary Leadership Project (NVLP), Toni Morrison discusses the theme of flight within the text, and she notes the need for Milkman to “escape the cultural prison he found himself in” (00:05:05-00:06:03). The cultural prison she is describing, of course, is the Jim Crow era in American history. The evils of Jim Crow feature prominently in *Song of Solomon* even though the setting is in

Michigan. Because of the span of time and depth of depravity, Jim Crow is a vast subject. I am narrowing this contextual introduction to focus on the aspects that have particular bearing on the novel: namely, segregation and intense racial violence and terror.

Through Reconstruction, in the decade after the Civil War, the government attempted to instate African Americans as political citizens of the United States. As the annals of history show, Reconstruction failed and the constitutional amendments passed to protect African Americans' rights as citizens were not honored, especially in southern states. Jim Crow laws were adopted to block African Americans from attaining social or economic status. In *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow*, Jerrold M. Packard defines Jim Crow as the "legal, quasi-legal, or customary practice of disenfranchising, physically segregating, barring, and discriminating against black Americans, virtually the sole practitioners of such practices being white Americans" (15). Packard notes that Jim Crow was originally a vaudeville character invented by Thomas "Daddy" Rice. It is not known how the term evolved from the minstrel character to a stand in for racial segregation and discrimination in the United States (14).

Jim Crow laws sought to separate blacks and whites in every social setting and force inequality in every imaginable institution.¹¹ Although more prominent in the South, as seen in *Song of Solomon*, Jim Crow laws existed in northern states as well. In the novel's opening scene, Morrison describes the setting of Robert Smith's "flight" at the shore end of Not Doctor Street (4). She goes on to explain that Mercy's residents once called the street Doctor Street to indicate that Dr. Foster lived there and would treat them, but they began calling it Not Doctor Street when

¹¹ In an entry on Jim Crow laws in the *Encyclopedia of American Government and Civics*, Kevan M. Yenerall gives an extensive list of "activities, institutions, and conditions" that Jim Crow laws covered: "marriage, libraries, lunch counters, cemeteries/burial rights, juvenile delinquents, fishing, boating, bathing, seating in theaters, telephone booths, prisons, bathrooms, child custody matters, transportation (trains and, later, buses) medical care and hospital entrances" (par. 6).

city officials would not recognize the name and insisted it be called Mains Ave. Through this information, the reader gains insight into the way Jim Crow laws pervaded the city, blocking black residents from equal access to healthcare. Residents referred to the charity hospital as No Mercy Hospital because they were restricted access to the center. The day after Smith's failed flight in 1931, Ruth Foster was the first African American woman to be permitted to give birth inside the hospital. The residents are segregated by housing too, which is why it is all the more unforgivable that Macon Dead is so ruthless as a land owner and property manager.

Segregation is only one part of the evils of Jim Crow in *Song of Solomon*. Through the Seven Days men, readers are introduced to the extreme terror and racial violence to which African Americans were subjected. At one point in the novel, the Seven Days men are in the barbershop talking about Emmett Till's death, so the plot has advanced to 1955. It is clear from their conversation there will be no justice for this young man who was brutally murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman (80). Guitar is particularly outraged, but the old men seem to have accepted white on black violence as barely newsworthy. Racial violence, particularly lynchings, were outrageously common. In *A Red Record*, Ida B. Wells-Barnett gives an account of lynching in the United States. The book was first published in 1895, so the statistics she gives pale in comparison to actual numbers of black lives lost to lynching. Even so, she gives the statistic of 10,000 killed according to white records. Of those, only three white men had faced repercussions of judicial trial or execution for their actions (10). As in our day, people become desensitized to brutality. While I do not agree with their methods, the Seven Days men refused to succumb to desensitivity and instead fought for their community against the foe of Jim Crow.

Justice and Hermeneutical Ethics

At its foundation, hermeneutical ethics asks people to acknowledge their complicity in perpetuating injustice. As Martha Nussbaum and Adam Zachary Newton argue, when applied to narrative, it is the ethical responsibility readers assume just by engaging in the act of reading. The author creates a rhetorical situation whereby the readers question their own motives and interests as they reconstruct meaning of a text by interrogating gaps and indeterminacies (Toker 5). In choosing to read the novel, readers position themselves as ethical agents, and the text is an intercessor that moves them through violence without enacting it.

Rather than a prescriptive moral directive, hermeneutical narrative ethics opens the text for readers to discern what justice model they see most suitable and then act rather than finishing reading the text, unchanged. The goal of this reflexive reading is for readers to be accountable, subjected to the transformative power of the text. It is both a public and private affair as one reads and questions self but then also communicates a message to others. The public portion is an ethical performance for which reading has made the person accountable. As Pilate is dying, she says, “I wish I’d a knowed more people. I would of loved ‘em all. If I’d a knowed more, I would a loved more” (336). This proclamation coincides with my argument about the role of literature and ethics: when activated as ethical agents, readers are responsible to more.

In *Poetic Justice*, Nussbaum discusses readers’ responsibility and makes optimistic claims about literature’s power. She believes the literary imagination is one part of an ethical stance that helps people understand others, especially those who are vastly different than us (xvi). Nussbaum acknowledges that she is optimistic even in the midst of prejudice and hatred (xvii) because she believes literary imagination is the “bridge to social justice” (xviii). This approach is certainly fitting in a text like *Song of Solomon* where the characters are subject to

prejudice and hatred and their lives provide a blueprint of necessity for such a bridge. This bridge is essentially built on a compassionate response and judgment about material life (7). Like James Phelan, Nussbaum uses Wayne Booth's notion of *coduction* to show how to close the loop of responsible reading. Booth creates this neologism, *coduction*, by combining the Latin prefix *co* ("together") with the Latin word *ducere* ("to lead, draw out, bring, bring out") (72). He uses the term to refer to when readers make a comparative assertion of a work based on other works they have read and then invite another reader or readers into a conversation about that assertion (72-73). When readers engage in *coduction*, they have a conversation with others who will both challenge their analysis and help supplement their interpretation (9). His point is that through the course of conversation, there is a potential for change and personal growth. In advocating for *coduction*, Nussbaum gets at the crux of narrative ethics: through reflexive reading, readers choose as ethical agents to take up the responsibility with which the literature charges them (31), essentially building that bridge toward social justice in their own spheres of influence.

James Phelan is especially concerned with how *coduction* happens. In *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*, Phelan claims that the ethical is one of the three main dimensions of storytelling, along with the cognitive and the emotive (ix). In relation to narrative, the ethical dimension prompts readers to question what the text asks them to value and to consider how these judgments are formed. Phelan asserts that narration is a "*layered ethical situation*" (20) and that readers' ethical position arises from four ethical situations (23). As noted in my introduction, I base my literary analysis in each chapter on one of Phelan's ethical situations.¹² In the online *Handbook of Narratology*, Phelan describes four situations

¹² As a reminder, this chapter examines *Song of Solomon* through the first situation, dealing with characters. My second chapter on Walker's *Meridian* draws on Phelan's third situation regarding implied author. My third chapter examines Bambara's narration *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, which is Phelan's second ethical situation. I examine Phelan's fourth ethical situation regarding readers' response in all three chapters.

related to narrative ethics: “(1) the ethics of the told; (2) the ethics of the telling; (3) the ethics of writing/producing; and (4) the ethics of reading/reception” (par. 2). These four situations correlate to the ethical situations he describes in *Living to Tell about It*. The ethics of the told relates to characters. The ethics of the telling refers to implied authors or narrators whereas the ethics of writing/producing refers to actual authors. The ethics of reading/reception relates to readers and their responsibility when they engage with a text. I see the ways in which *Song of Solomon* lends itself especially to Phelan’s first situation, which is wrapped up in the characters in the story, and I will deal with the other two situations involving narration and author in my subsequent chapters. The fourth ethical situation he articulates is “that of the flesh-and-blood reader in relation to the set of values, beliefs, and locations operating in situations 1-3” (23), so it is useful to engage that situation in all of my chapters.

Drawing from Phelan’s first narrative ethical situation, in this chapter, I examine four main characters’ ability to offer mercy and redemption, both to self and to others. The characters’ ability or inability serves as a model for willing readers to interrogate as they are activated as ethical agents as a result of their reading. I begin with Macon Dead II and will then turn to Guitar, Pilate, and Milkman. I consider Macon the most unscrupulous character; he is also the least willing to care for others. Macon can neither grant mercy nor offer redemption because his whole life is wrapped up in doling out retribution for his father’s murder. It matters little to him that the recipients of his retribution are not those responsible for his loss. This misplaced retribution is a place for readers to engage in self-examination.

Macon: No Mercy

Macon’s father’s death has left Macon and Pilate in an uncertain position; however, Macon seems more negatively affected than Pilate because the loss stirs in him a persistent anger

and retributive mission. The perpetual feeling of lack leads to an extreme desire for prestige. He is willing to pursue prestige regardless of the cost, which hinders him from cultivating meaningful relationships or experiencing personal growth. Interestingly, Macon fits the description of the utilitarian Nussbaum outlines in *Poetic Justice* (15): he is neither concerned with the “qualitative distinctions between persons,” for they are all the same to him—outside the home, they are a rent check to collect; inside the home, they are a person to control. Nor is Macon concerned with the agency of those around him. He does not want to recognize their freedom of choice because he sees them as merely the cogs in the wheel of his life that spins merely to make his life easier and his reputation more prominent. Through Macon’s unyielding interactions with others, Morrison crafts Macon as an unlikeable character, thus making readers, who engage in a hermeneutical reading of the text, recognize his shortcomings and want to turn from any resemblance to Macon in their own lives.

Macon marries Ruth Foster because her father is a prominent physician, not because he loves her. In fact, the emotion he always feels when thinking of Ruth is “coated with disgust” (16). At the time he first calls on Ruth, he owns two properties, so in his mind, he is worthy of Ruth: “To lift the lion’s paw knocker, to entertain thoughts of marrying the doctor’s daughter was possible because each key represented a house which he owned at the time” (22). The semantically ironic part of that sentence is the use of “each.” We know there are only two keys, but saying “each” instead of “both” makes it seem as if he owns more rental properties. Morrison uses narration that embeds Macon’s sense of self-importance and worthiness. Marrying Ruth, who is nine years his junior, is a conduit to the material life he wants—she represents access to her father’s capital, financial security, and positive name recognition rather than the legacy he has bristled under from the time he was an orphaned teenager. Even semantics cannot hide the

faulty relational foundation he builds and the way it affects his familial relations and ultimately his work.

Emotionally stunted, Macon cannot relate to his family. He lords over them, invoking chronic fear: “Solid, rumbling, likely to erupt without prior notice, Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear” (10). Every word he speaks to Ruth is laced with disdain, and the disappointment he feels toward Lena and Corinthians is palpable to the point of changing their voices and complexion. He wants a family he can parade around as he struts like a peacock, but his reign of terror over the family makes that prospect impossible. Macon wants a family and community who will idolize him and see him as indispensable. Ironically, Milkman is able to offer him this adoring community after Milkman’s visit to Danville, Pennsylvania: “But there were long rambling talks with his father, who could not hear it enough—the ‘boys’ who remembered him in Danville; his mother’s running off with his father; the story about his father and grandfather” (334). These stories and the people who tell them give Macon’s life meaning. To the men in Danville, Macon is the extraordinary son and grandson who is now a successful businessman; they do not know the Macon Dead II everyone else knows, the Macon Dead who is so choked by resentment that he cannot relate to those around him.

The grudge Macon carries over his father’s death limits his ability to be compassionate, and this lack of compassion alienates him from his family and community. One of the earliest glimpses we see of his ruthlessness is the way he treats Mrs. Bains, Guitar’s grandmother. After Guitar’s father’s on-the-job accidental death, Guitar and his siblings are sent to be raised by their grandmother. She cannot cover the expenses of raising children on a fixed income and goes to Macon’s office to plead for mercy, a plea he denies (22). When she tells him babies cannot make it with nothing in their stomachs, he implies it is more important to pay rent than feed the

children and retorts sharply, “Can they make it in the street, Mrs. Bains? That’s where they gonna be if you don’t figure out some way to get me my money” (21). After his own father’s death, Macon has had to carve out his own path to success, and because he has been monetarily successful, he refuses to look with compassion on those of lesser means. It seems to escape him that Dr. Foster’s money has allowed him to exponentially grow his business from “two keys” to what it is at present in the novel. He is emotionally stunted by his loss and unable to relate to others.

This loss and the need for retribution blind Macon to the truth. After Milkman punches Macon at dinner, throwing him into the radiator, Macon believes it is time he enlightened Milkman to the truth about Macon and Ruth’s relationship. Macon says, “You a big man now, but big ain’t nearly enough. You have to be a whole man. And if you want to be a whole man, you have to deal with the whole truth” (70). Macon believes he is the person to deliver this whole truth, but as with every other person, his “truth” is clouded by perception and past pain. When Milkman follows Ruth to Fairfield Cemetery late one night, she discloses another version of the truth: “I don’t know what all your father has told you about me...but I know, as well as I know my own name, that he told you only what was flattering to him” (124). Milkman has to grapple with these disparate versions to be a whole man, but neither of his parents have equipped him to be discerning and think of anyone other than himself. Life with Macon has made Ruth diminutive, always pandering to Milkman.

Macon’s incessant need to own things is possibly the trait that makes him the most defunct character in the novel. With materiality guiding his moral compass, he always comes up short in his capacity to offer mercy and redemption, and this incapacity isolates him from his family and the community. When he leaves Porter’s after demanding rent, Macon feels the

loneliness with which his miserly ways have left him: “--in fact, he felt as though the houses were in league with one another to make him feel like an outsider, the propertyless, landless wanderer” (27). Macon must own property to feel worthy even as that necessity cements his isolation.¹³ The town makes him feel as if he is an outlier, which speaks to the importance of community. Macon has power via ownership but is quite poor and powerless to enact his will. Throughout the novel, even the members of his household rebel against him with physical violence, clandestine trips, and secret relationships. Since he would rather own them than relate to them, he is unable to make right those relationships.

A portion of narrative ethics that is particularly applicable to an analysis of Macon’s character is mimetic justification. For the moment in this analysis, I am referring to Phelan’s first definition of mimesis: “[T]hat component of character directed to its imitation of a possible person” (216). As readers, we have surely known a Macon; perhaps even some *are* a Macon, obsessed with wealth and prestige to the detriment of every relation one has. Going back to Phelan’s ethical positions in the ethical situation related to characters, Morrison is setting readers up to form a mimetic justification. Especially in a narrative ethical reading of the text, readers make up a significant part of how meaning is made. While Macon’s shortcomings are obvious to most readers, applying mimesis brings Macon out of the fictional world. When readers think of Macon as real person they know (or are), his flaws are even more glaring and dangerous, having the potential to tear down individual families and larger communities. Macon is more than a foil to Milkman’s development; he is Morrison’s warning against a life of retribution.

¹³ Macon is treating his tenants as commodities, thus engaging in racial capitalism, for his rental dwellings house the disenfranchised members of society who are poor, black, and have difficulty paying their rent. As Bledsoe, et al. argue, black, urban communities are subjected to racial capitalism as their oppression feeds the wealthy’s increased capital (1). In real ways, marginalized people become property to own in the game of who can accumulate the most wealth.

Guitar: Violent Mercy

My analysis transitions from arguably the least sympathetic character in the novel to the most troubled one, Guitar Bains. As mentioned in the opening of this chapter, Morrison points out in her introduction that mercy is the unspoken request of the novel's population. As one of the Seven Days men, Guitar believes he is granting mercy to the innocent African Americans whose lives have been taken by white men. I acknowledge this belief is a significant counterargument to my notion of avoiding retributive violence. The Seven Days are a model of vigilante justice, enacting retributive violence because they believe it is the only form of justice African Americans would ever witness in their community. As Guitar says, "If there was anything like or near justice or courts when a cracker kills a negro, there wouldn't have to be no Seven Days" (160). The Seven Days emerge because an avenue for legal justice is absent for African Americans in Jim Crow America. They believe their means are justified and necessary to protect their community.

Readers become privy to Guitar's rationale for retributive violence through his conversations with Milkman as well as with fellow members of the Seven Days. Milkman is present with Guitar in the barber shop when the men are heatedly discussing Emmett Till's death. Sadly, their epistemology tells them justice will not be served within the constraints of the law. Guitar's contribution to the conversation is especially telling: "Ain't no law for no colored man except the one that sends him to the chair" (82). This comment reveals a known reality among the community—the justice system exists only to convict, not to protect, African Americans. As Ralph Story argues in "An Excursion into the Black World," the Seven Days men represent an immediacy, a willingness to no longer wait for justice (152). This lack of justice is

what drives the Seven Days men, including Guitar, to enact violence to avenge violence committed against African Americans at the hands of white men.

The Seven Days' eye-for-an-eye methodology is straightforward, but Morrison helps readers further understand the motivation through Guitar's extended conversations with Milkman where he reveals his personal convictions. Guitar believes he is maintaining a generational balance by avenging white on black crime (154). If every person could produce offspring that will go on for five to seven generations, a white person killing a black person jeopardizes that generational balance, so Guitar is compelled to maintain the balance. He says, "I can't suck teeth or say 'Eh, eh, eh.' I had to do something" (154). The intrinsic desire to act aligns directly with narrative ethics. Nussbaum notes the power of the compassionate response, especially when we judge that damage is being done to another human (7). In a disheartening way, Guitar is enacting the true definition of compassion—he is sharing in the sufferings of another human being by taking on their grief and anguish and then avenging on their behalf with retributive violence.

A major flaw in Guitar's rationale is his belief that any white person *could* kill a black person; therefore, no white person is innocent. Since a person of any race is capable of committing murder, race is not the determining factor in one's propensity for violence, and it does not follow to deem an entire race guilty or innocent based on the actions of individuals within that race. Guitar's notions of generational balance and propensity for violence are undermined when he attempts to murder Milkman. The Seven Days are supposed to avenge white on black crime; however, Guitar is willing to kill a black man as his revenge killing. Clearly, the retribution is not purely about race but rather fighting systematic oppression. The Seven Days are avenging systematic oppression in addition to racial violence, and Guitar sees

Milkman as an oppressor, part of the system that allows four little black girls to be blown up at Sunday School.

Beyond the logical flaw I see with Guitar's rationale, I further argue that this system based on retributive violence is not only flawed but fatal and thus ineffectual in ushering in change. The novel opens with Robert Smith jumping to his death from the hospital's roof. The tasks the Seven Days entrusted to him prove too much for his psyche. Granting others mercy means he himself is denied it. Porter nearly follows in Smith's footsteps. Porter is distraught, crying and perched in a window with a shotgun; he is threatening suicide because he cannot bear the burden he carries as a Seven Days man.¹⁴ While it is easy to assume hatred motivates his actions, Porter claims it is love that compels and tortures him. He whimpers, "I'll take hate any day. But don't give me love. I can't take no more love, Lord. I can't carry it. Just like Mr. Smith. He couldn't carry it. It's too heavy" (26). Porter is weighed down by the magnitude of his love and the secrets and responsibility he bears, and he is not alone in carrying this burden.

The secrecy to which Porter, Guitar, and the other Seven Days are bound is gravely isolating. For Guitar, the secrecy and anonymity increase his suffering and burden, thereby fueling his commitment to retribution. As he tells Milkman, the group operates on absolute anonymity. Milkman argues it would give black people hope to know there are agents of retribution; however, Guitar claims the risk of betrayal is too high. The Seven Days do not even discuss the details of the assignments and outcomes among themselves. They are a model of the negative effects of keeping too much in. Humans are not meant to bear single-handedly so emotional weight that it drives people to self-harm; we are to carry each other's burdens. Guitar

¹⁴ While I regard Smith's suicide and Porter's attempted suicide as attempts at escape, it is important to note that others regard their actions as revolutionary. Katy Ryan makes such an argument in "Revolutionary Suicide in Toni Morrison's Fiction." She contends that suicide is an act committed for the communal struggle against oppression rather than an individual's escape.

acknowledges the group encourages suicide before confession: “And if ever it gets to be too much, like it was for Robert Smith, we do *that* rather than crack and tell somebody” (158). This commitment to retribution is clearly not self-serving. The members of the group are willing to die rather than seek help for the mental toll they tarry. As a Seven Days man, Guitar is selfless, which is an admirable quality, but the degree to which he exhibits it is self-destructive.

Guitar is willing to go to self-destructive lengths for the sake of his community. With the lack of a fair justice system for black people, Guitar is driven by his desire to enact community-sanctioned violence for the sake of the community. He believes he is protecting present and future lives, and he is willing to risk his own life to do it. As he tells Milkman, “It’s not about you living longer. It’s about how you live and why. It’s about whether your children can make other children. It’s about trying to make a world where one day white people will think before they lynch” (160). This should be an arresting line for readers, especially white readers.

Morrison sets the novel in a distinct historical era where lynching was an eminent threat to black lives. Contemporary readers are well aware that the threat to black lives has not diminished even if lynching is not the typical mode.

In that critical scene, readers should be halted into introspection and then driven to action.¹⁵ This is the place where one must be honest and responsible enough to ask to what kind of lynching they are complicit and what they are going to do about it. And if readers learn

¹⁵ Although contemporary readers may assume that lynchings no longer occur in the United States and their influence is thus void as well, the Equal Justice Initiative’s report, “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror,” makes clear that the effects of these heinous crimes remain entrenched in American society, especially the criminal justice system: “Most importantly, lynching reinforced a narrative of racial difference and a legacy of racial inequality that is readily apparent in our criminal justice system today. Mass incarceration, racially biased capital punishment, excessive sentencing, disproportionate sentencing of racial minorities, and police abuse of people of color reveal problems in American society that were shaped by the terror era.” A reader committed to a hermeneutical reading can take action by volunteering to support a former prison re-entering society or contacting local representatives in Congress to support the Restoring Education and Learning Act (REAL) Act to give imprisoned persons access to federal financial aid.

anything from the Seven Days men, it is that action in isolation is not good for the soul. This is why reading the novel is a private act but should also be a public one where readers engage other people. *Coduction* ensures people become more aware of their own blind spots, and work to move through the violence in the book without having to enact it themselves. Counter-violence, no matter how justified, only breeds more violence. The cycle is endless; therefore, shared experience lessens the isolation that drives one desperately to retaliation, which is why literature can serve as that intercessor, creating shared experience (first between characters and readers and then, through *coduction*, other readers) where that experience may not exist in one's material life.

While I do not promote Guitar's methods, I believe Guitar is the most helpful character to readers in grappling with their own stumbling blocks to a life without retributive violence. He does not skate through life like Milkman, and he does not have the time post-trauma that Macon and Pilate have had. As Jan Furman points out in the introduction to her casebook on the novel, "[Guitar] is gradually overwhelmed by the violence of a black man's life in America" (6). Guitar continues to live a life subjected to systematic oppression, and his ontology has shaped his place in this system. Readers get a sense of how Guitar believes his past is determining his present as he shares with Milkman that even as a toddler he was a very good hunter. Grown men dubbed him a "natural-born hunter" (85). The current correlation to his role as a hunter of white men is obvious, but his retelling of a hunting story to Milkman reveals that even Guitar believes his brand of retributive violence is fraught. He confesses that he felt bad about killing a doe on a hunt long ago. Readers know hunters shoot bucks, not does. Presumably, he feels guilty, and conjuring this memory could be his way of questioning his participation in a system that takes innocent lives.

The advice Guitar gives Milkman following the retelling of the hunting story is ostensibly impossible and requires readers to determine how they will respond to injustice. He describes the way in which black men in particular are disadvantaged in the “game.” He acknowledges that trying to stay alive in the game compromises a person and can drive them to hurt others. He tells Milkman, “But look here, don’t carry it inside and don’t give it to nobody else. Try to understand it, but if you can’t, just forget it and keep yourself strong, man” (87-88). His advice to neither internalize nor externalize by telling someone else seems impossible to accept; therefore, readers must determine how to operate within the game without hurting others. With that contradictory advice, Guitar helps readers ask questions whereas Pilate gives readers some answers. Pilate’s system is a foil to Guitar’s, for she believes that even killing someone does not allow a person to be rid of the other person.

Pilate: Peaceful Mercy

As Dana Medoro argues in “Justice and Citizenship in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*,” Guitar’s model of justice represents the reality of the absence of justice for African Americans whereas Pilate’s model represents the ideal. As an intercessor that works to create a common memory, literature allows readers to believe in and curate the ideal in our own lives. We do not have a common historical memory, but Pilate’s system of justice gives hope that a common memory can be created as we avoid violence. The common memory cannot be built without a reader taking personal responsibility. Medoro draws on Drucilla Cornell’s work in *The Philosophy of Limit* to make the argument that people must change; structures will not change first. Justice depends on people heeding their ethical responsibility (Medoro 8). I argue that literature provides a model and an opportunity to do just that.

As one analyzes the text to discern how Pilate's peaceful justice system operates, one recognizes that her system is not flawless. The scene that arguably works against Pilate's anti-retribution model is when she wields a knife, threatening the man who was abusing Reba. She is in control of the situation, and she makes sure the man knows she could choose to lose that control at any moment and take his life. She makes him promise he will leave Reba alone. She demands a "real promise," and he replies, "Yeah. I promise. You won't never see me no more" (95). Medoro points out the nuance of this exchange. Asking for a promise implies trust and gives the perpetrator a future. She claims Pilate's system uses an "ethics of listening." Part of that ethical system is a mutual responsibility to each other. Pilate maintains control while also opening an opportunity for others to take up responsibility for their actions.

As seen through her justice system, Pilate's existence is for redemption and reconciliation, not retribution. She becomes a sort of kinsman redeemer in guiding Milkman back to his family. That journey affords Milkman the opportunity to redefine his identity, and it helps Pilate understand what her father has been telling her for years after his death—that we are responsible for those we leave behind. She originally came to Michigan to reconcile with Macon, but she stayed for Ruth (151). If it were not for Pilate, Ruth would have aborted Milkman and possibly lost her own life in the process. Pilate cannot save the family from Macon's bitter rage, but she redeems them in her gentle way.

Pilate is an essential character to the novel, for she is the giver of mercy and the one who makes it possible for Milkman to ultimately grant mercy. Without her, readers would lack an ideal model for how to deal with injustice. Her justice system is shaped by her unique worldview, which was formed by her early introduction to epistemic violence. She witnessed her father lose his land because he could not read and was tricked into signing his mark (53). She

saw this injustice early in life and believed love could make it right. Unlike Guitar and Macon II, losing her father did not make her vengeful or despotic; her loss inspired her to help everyone and maintain control (93). Her response is markedly different than the men's, and that response affects her worldview.

Pilate's isolation does not make her bitter; instead, her isolation shapes her worldview to be one filled with concern. Having been isolated from her family, she is ostracized for not having a navel. She finds sanctuary and "relative bliss" on the island, but as in her other relationships, she is alienated (148). She asks herself deep questions about happiness, livelihood, and truth. Her answers shape who she is. As this passage from the text shows, the answers also reveal her intrinsic desire to care: "[Her lack of fear] plus her alien's compassion for troubled people ripened her...she gave up, apparently, all interest in table manners or hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships" (149). Her life experience taught her to care about the inside of a person and not outward appearance. She is a natural healer. Ultimately, these attributes sanctify her, setting her apart from everyone else save her daughter and granddaughter.

Pilate's worldview informs how readers respond to her both as a character and the ideals she represents. As she is dying, Pilate proclaims, "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (336). This is a crucial line to a narrative ethics reading of the text, for in these dying words, Pilate lays out a hermeneutics of love for both Milkman and readers. The way Pilate interprets the world is based on love—not love of money like Macon II or violent love like Guitar, but genuine love that grows from deep concern over another's well-being. Paired with love is responsibility. Pilate speaks to that aspect by saying if she had known more, she would have loved more; indeed, she would have extended

mercy to everyone with whom she came in contact. This pairing of love and responsibility is a map for readers as they navigate an imperfect, violent world. As Macon I said, you cannot fly off a leave a body (333). We are responsible to and for one another. This lesson Pilate teaches changes the course of Milkman's life.

Milkman: Unexpected Mercy

Milkman has several character traits that make him less than a stellar pupil for Pilate, at least through the majority of the novel. He is a dynamic character, however, and his self-discovery becomes a model for readers too. Prior to experiencing growth, Milkman has a fixation on the past that inhibits his journey to self-discovery. We see evidence of this early on when he accidentally urinates on Lena: "It was becoming a habit—this concentration on things behind him. Almost as though there were no future to be had" (35). Into adulthood, Milkman is largely disassociated from his actions. He is disconnected from the circumstances that both precede and follow his actions, and disconnection keeps him focused on himself, stripping him of any concern for others.

Milkman's disassociation is clearest when he hits his father and the fallout from hitting him. Milkman admits that love for his mother did not drive his action (75). His motives are selfish, which makes the violent act ineffectual rather than life-changing. This display of disobedience is not transformative because Milkman is ill-equipped personally to deal with change that would make his life less comfortable. In the glee he feels in pummeling his father, a change could have transpired but does not. As Morrison phrases it, "Infinite possibilities and enormous responsibilities stretched out before him, but he was not prepared to take advantage of the former, or accept the burden of the latter" (68). Milkman is too self-centered at this point in the novel for this to be a transformative experience. The text is also clear that neither do his

actions change anything about his parents' relationship or them as individuals (68). Someone finally stood up to Macon, and that act could have changed the family indefinitely; however, violence does not effect change in this instance because it is purposeless and rooted in selfishness.

Morrison embeds evidence of Milkman's selfishness and delayed transformation into the structure of the text. In an interview with Elissa Schappell, Morrison divulges that a train was her controlling image when writing *Song of Solomon* (258). This image works to characterize Milkman; as a train, he slowly builds speed, moving forward in the portions where he goes to Pennsylvania and Virginia, and then picking up speed quickly at the end when he has experienced his redemptive spiritual transformation and brings Pilate back to the cave in Pennsylvania. This controlling image describes plot conventions, but it also speaks to his characterization. As a train, he barreled along the track of life, caring not whom he would run over with his selfishness.

Milkman's selfishness is obvious, but I argue that Morrison uses this fight scene and subsequent father-son talk to reveal Macon's ethical system and charge readers with the task of entering the text as ethical agents. Through Milkman, Morrison instructs readers that our logical response should drive our emotional response: "[Milkman] wouldn't know what to feel until he knew what to think" (75). As Milkman processes his father's story, it is a time for readers to grapple too with the ethics that drive Macon's choices. Readers determine whether or not Macon is justified in treating Ruth so disdainfully. Readers weigh whether or not he is deserving of the prominent real estate business he believes he has built himself. Milkman takes in the unsavory details about his mother and, like readers, has to decipher the truth and what that truth means for him. As ethical agents, readers must determine if they can excuse Macon's ruthlessness and

complicity in an oppressive system that keeps his residents in poverty. By extension, readers also have to decide if they can excuse Milkman for acting violently with no concern for any of the other parties involved.

If readers can give Milkman a pass, it is likely because Milkman truly does not know what to do. His frustration stems from knowing this information his father has shared yet also knowing he can neither do anything about it nor confirm its veracity (76). Knowledge inherently prompts action, but as we see with Milkman, that action does not have to be violent action. Confusion can often lead to anger, which is why redirection is critical. Instead of violence, Milkman is redirected and plunges into the quest. Admittedly, his motives are not pure; he is initially driven by the prospect of fortune; however, as Jan Furman notes, “Because the gold does not exist, the focus of Milkman’s quest shifts to the richer vein of his acquiring virtue and heroic stature through a series of trials” (4). To gain those virtues, Milkman has to shed his self-destructive tendencies in exchange for community and compassion.

This is not an easy journey for Milkman, though, for there are other traits that inhibit his progress toward self-discovery. He lacks conviction and does not feel responsible to anyone or anything (107). He uses Hagar without remorse even though he acknowledges he is Hagar’s people. What is more is that Milkman is still apathetic and deflects even when he realizes these things about himself (120). From Milkman, readers observe the tenets of the unexamined life. Jan Furman attributes blame to Macon, saying Macon’s preoccupation for wealth leaves Milkman with no sense of empathy or understanding for others. In Milkman’s mind, he is a victim of circumstances: “He felt like a garbage pail for the actions and hatreds of other people. He himself did nothing...None of that was his fault, and he didn’t want to have to think or be or do something about any of it (120). This desire to deflect responsibility is unrealistic. Bearing

familial and social burdens is part and parcel of being human. Because he has been catered to his entire life, Milkman is too concerned with his own comfort (181), filled with weak motives (184), and wrought with entitlement (276). As readers recognize what holds Milkman back from self-discovery, the acknowledgement provides opportunity for personal reflection. The novel is an intercessor between readers and their motives and choices. It is easy to judge Milkman, but hermeneutical narrative ethics invites readers to determine the traits that also inhibit them from accepting responsibility and bringing forth justice.

Milkman's turning point occurs in Virginia. As Jan Furman phrases it in the introduction to her casebook on *Song of Solomon*, "Remarkably, in a single day and night, he transforms himself from callow and unthinking to generous and intuitive" (5). At this juncture in his journey, he is accepted for himself rather than for his father or grandfather. He feels as if he is his "own director" (260). What begins as self-pity transforms into genuine introspection. Milkman's musings about what he deserves progress to understanding the shared suffering and connection he has witnessed (277-78). In this moment of fresh understanding, Milkman is able to fulfill what Morrison says is the wish of the novel's population—to be granted mercy. For arguably the first time in his life, Milkman treats a woman in his life with actual regard. He offers to bathe Sweet (285). Miraculously, after he bathes her, he cleans her bathtub too. His mother and sisters have catered to him his entire life, and he has never considered thanking them or treating them with dignity. This scene is important for Milkman's journey, but it is also a reminder to readers to grant mercy to the least of these.

After Milkman's turning point, his motives shift. He denounces the sense of entitlement that has reigned preeminently in his life until now. It is as if he is tapping into the lessons Pilate taught him through modeling her version of justice. Life is about people and love. As Milkman

begins to acknowledge this reality, he turns from seeking gold to knowing people. He longs to know their stories. As the text says, “He didn’t feel close to them, but he did feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shared” (293). For the first time in his life, he experiences a sense of belonging and the reciprocal duty that comes with it.

Milkman also experiences liberation as he is brought into the Shalimar community. Catherine Carr Lee writes about the importance of past and place in “The South in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon: Initiation, Healing, and Home*.” She argues that the novel is a twist on the classic initiation story in that Milkman goes from an urban setting to a rural one and from his nuclear family to a community that connects him to his past (Carr Lee 44). Prior to his transformation, Milkman is poor in spirit. As Carr Lee says, “[Milkman’s] poverty is spiritual, not material; his sensitivity is that of adolescent self-centeredness” (44). Milkman overcomes this poverty and receives communal healing as he acquires cultural knowledge and accepts responsibility for his actions. He has been initiated to his past and extended family to receive individual and communal healing. His revelation comes through knowing his ancestors’ names; from a hermeneutical narrative ethics lens, this suggests that readers also need to know names. *Coduction* is richer and communal healing more possible when people know real names and do not rely on hypothetical codes as stand-ins for actual people, which further alienates people already on the margins.

Previously, Milkman always felt excluded. He did not have regard for any of his family members, and he did not care what anyone thought about him. When he learns more about his extended family, he is able to consider his immediate family with new understanding. Having shed his victim mentality, shame washes over him. Morrison describes the shame as “thick and tight as a caul” (300). He finally feels sorry for stealing from Pilate and using and discarding

Hagar (301). This is an important moment from a narrative ethics reading, for readers see that acknowledgement of wrongdoing or injustice does not suffice. If a reflexive reading unearths shame, that needs to be a catalyst for action. As Guitar says to Hagar, you cannot own a human (306); however, you can be accountable to one. Milkman leaves Virginia to return to Pilate's house with the goal of reconciliation. Pilate has one more lesson to teach Milkman and readers about accountability.

When Milkman arrives at Pilate's house, she hits him over the head with a bottle and locks him in the cellar with Hagar's body (331). In this moment, Milkman realizes that just as Shalimar left Ryna, he has left Hagar to lose her mind. Pilate's form of punishment is to make him responsible for the life he took. This line is repeated as a refrain through the novel: You cannot fly off a leave a body. Pilate understands her father to be talking about the man they killed in the cave. Milkman knows Jake was talking about his own father, Solomon (Shalimar) flying off and leaving him (333). It is a key moment for Milkman to take Hagar's hair from Pilate to bury. He is acknowledging that he, not Pilate, is responsible for Hagar (334).

In this moment where Milkman accepts responsibility for Hagar's life, Morrison is having him model an important aspect of hermeneutical narrative ethics. Drawing from Bhaktin's phrasing and concept, Adam Zachary Newton refers to a moment like this as *vzhivanie* or live-entering, which Newton defines as "a mode of active engagement with the other which mediates between identification or empathy on the one hand, and objective respect at a distance on the other" (85). Milkman's voice enters this germinal scene in a laconic but powerful way. In accepting responsibility for Hagar's death, he tells Pilate, "No. Give it here" (334). Live-entering requires voice, and voice is significant for the narrator or character; however, it is also an important take-away for readers. When people are silent to injustice, they are passively

complicit. Like Milkman with Hagar through much of the novel, ignorance compounds another's suffering and can lead them to violence, even self-inflicted violence. Milkman has persistently dehumanized Hagar as the other, simply using her for sex, but once he learns about Solomon, he treats her memory with empathy.

Morrison uses Milkman as a model of live-entering. Through his character, readers observe what it takes to put one's self in the place of the other person. Milkman's *modus operandi* was to wall himself against accountability or general regard for others. Pilate, through her worldview and justice system, breaks the boundaries Milkman has hidden behind, enabling him to show mercy to the other. He has gone on a journey that has led him into introspection, and the result is genuine empathy. Through an unlikely character, the novel intercedes for readers. We do not have to have experienced the same things as Milkman or some of the less fortunate characters like Hagar or Guitar. Literature makes their experiences and need for compassionate live-entering part of our common memory. I did not have to live through the evils of Jim Crow laws to recognize their remnants in current policies. But acknowledging those remnants makes me (and by extension any reader) accountable to resisting them so that those affected by them do not have to turn to violence.

Morrison shows the hopelessness and suffering that comes when one commits to retributive violence, but she also shows an alternative way to move through it. The act of talking is vital to being understood, which is vital to being a part of a community. The novel promotes individualism but the kind that is discovered within a community to which that individual can belong. The novel shows how isolating retributive violence is. Guitar may be surrounded by six other like-minded men, but they cannot talk about their actions. As Robert Smith demonstrates,

the Seven Days' unwritten rule is to take one's own life rather than crack and talk. This lack of permission to divulge makes true community impossible and increases its members' suffering.

Milkman, however, finds community in Virginia. He can talk about who he is without shame. They initiate him into their community through talking to him. He leaves that community to return to Michigan with the need to tell. He cannot wait to tell Pilate what he has discovered about their family. Talk and community have finally brought him peace, and he is eager to share it. The lack of discourse and true community leaves Guitar isolated and bloodthirsty; therefore, retributive violence does not suffice because you cannot fly off and leave a body. The life taken will continue to haunt the person. The cycle will never end because the person's responsibility to that other soul will never end.

Interestingly, at the end of the novel, there is no reconciliation between Pilate and Macon and no change between Macon and Ruth. Human relationships are still fraught. Discovering something life-changing about ourselves does not mean others will share the new understanding. While that is true, that is not a reason to walk away from a story unchanged. As a reader, *coduction* is a responsibility one has to the text. Live-entering to feel empathy for a person unlike yourself is a way to be changed by a text, a way to allow a text to intercede where retribution might have felt like the only suitable response to injustice. As a person of faith, the word "intercede" holds a particular meaning for me. It speaks to another entity working on my behalf, and literature also has this ability. Literature redeems readers, offering mercy rather than violence, and forms a new common memory where material life and past experiences could not. Morrison, as a black, womanist writer, answers a call to redemption through the novel, and it is up to readers to respond as ethical agents and also answer that call to redemption rather than retribution.

CHAPTER TWO:

ESCALATING REVOLUTION AND SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

Alice Walker's second novel, *Meridian* (1976), is a nonlinear account of Meridian Hill's painful journey to self-discovery. A multitude of loved ones and strangers have wronged her in horrific ways, but Meridian learns to forgive and move past the hurt. *Meridian's* forgiveness is based on the hallmarks of the Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision: love, nonviolence, and community.¹⁶ Her personal spiritual awakening allows her to empathize with those who are suffering, and she is a model for readers for how to share in others' suffering and tap into transformative power as members of the Beloved Community, as King would phrase it.¹⁷ *Meridian* is evidence of the redemption without violence that is possible when readers are committed to personal and political transformation, but she has had to endure tremendous pain and doubt to reach this place of love and awakening. She is thrust on this journey of self-discovery when first asked if she would kill for the Revolution (15). She cannot answer and feels as if she is missing the sacred.¹⁸ She has been chasing the sacred ecstasy she experienced on the Sacred Serpent¹⁹ as a child, and she knows she cannot reach it merely by reciting rhetoric. This

¹⁶ In "Keeping the Dream Alive: *Meridian* as Alice Walker's Homage to Martin Luther King and the Beloved Community," Paul Tewkesbury also adds redemptive suffering to this list of the spiritual aspects of King's philosophy (603). He elucidates the spiritual connection between *Meridian* and the Civil Rights Movement, specifically King's contribution to the Movement. Tewkesbury asserts that both Walker and King see suffering as redemptive and able to transform society (610).

¹⁷ Dr. King used the phrase "Beloved Community" in 1956 at a victory rally after the U.S. Supreme Court decided to desegregate Montgomery busses. His vision for the Beloved Community involves inclusiveness that allows for economic and social justice as well as human decency that leaves no room for racism or prejudice.

¹⁸ In *Remembered Rapture*, bell hooks argues for the importance of the sacred. In the chapter, "Divine Inspiration," she encourages readers to infuse everyday actions with the sacred, for only then can we "hear the rhythms of grace" (125). The lack of the sacred in her daily life strips Meridian of purpose and clarity of thought.

¹⁹ The Sacred Serpent is a five-hundred-yard hill on the Hill's property that twisted and curved like a snake. It has a forty-foot pit at the "tail." Meridian's great-grandmother, Feather Mae, experienced ecstasy in the center of that pit, and Meridian's father also visited it often to be in touch with the Native Americans who had previously occupied the

revolutionary group has been changed by the violence they have witnessed and by the threat of violence to which they pledge themselves, and Meridian cannot commit to that transformation when she knows the transformative power she seeks is characterized instead by love and nonviolence. Truman tries to convince her that Revolutionary killing is “systematic...simply eradicate them, like you would eradicate a disease” (204). But Meridian’s orientation to others and connection to the sacred does not allow her to write off lives; she puts a human face on both suffering and oppression. Like Walker who subscribes to King’s philosophy, violence is not revolutionary for Meridian.²⁰ She reveals her stance during a conversation with Truman: “Besides, revolution would not begin, do you think, with an act of murder—wars might begin in that way—but with teaching” (205). Through this perspective, readers can gain an understanding that true revolution and healing comes through lessons of radical love.

In Chapter One, I examine *Song of Solomon* through a hermeneutical ethical lens according to Phelan’s first ethical situation regarding characters. In this chapter, I build on that initial theoretical lens by analyzing Alice Walker as the implied author in *Meridian* through feminist ethics of care. While it is fraught to tread the ground of authorial intent, Walker is clear on her website about her intention for the novel and its statement on the Civil Rights Movement. On Alice Walker’s official website, *Meridian* is referred to as “a spiritual biography of The Civil Rights Movement” (“About,” par. 3). In 2014, she was part of a *Meridian* seminar being taught

land. Meridian has an out-of-body experience in the pit. The narrator describes the visits to the Sacred Serpent’s tail as a “way the living sought to expand the consciousness of being alive” (53). Meridian seems to pursue that ecstasy and raised consciousness throughout the rest of her life.

²⁰ Lynn Pifer explores Meridian’s role in the revolution in “Coming to Voice in Alice Walker’s *Meridian*.” She argues that even though Meridian does not speak for the revolution in traditional, boisterous ways, her silence is a method of speaking out. Pifer quotes Karen F. Stein to explain why silence is such an effective method rather than violence: “Walker’s novel affirms that it is not by taking a life that true revolution will come about, but through respect for life and authentic living of life...gained only through each individual’s slow, painful confrontation of self” (qtd. in par. 5).

by Robert Cohen at the University of California. I quote at length because her words affirm my analytical lens:

In speaking with the alertly interested young UC students around me, I was reminded of what I had wanted, all those years ago, to show: that the ‘meaning’ of the Civil Rights Movement in that novel, was, above all, that it was a training ground for the recognition and use, to our own benefit, of our collective compassion and love; and, as well, a preparation for the full and free future use of our individual and/ or collective voice.

(“*Meridian* Seminar,” par. 1)

Walker’s description of her rhetorical purpose echoes some of the hallmarks of feminist ethics of care: compassion, interdependence, and voice—her womanist priority is emphasized through the inclusion of love. Without explicitly mentioning them, *Meridian* also exhibits other values important to feminist care ethicists: vulnerability, atonement, inclusion, and the sacred. The latter part of this chapter will examine the way in which *Meridian* affirms those values; however, it is important to first frame the discussion in a general historical context of the Civil Rights Movement as it has bearing on the novel’s events and then a discussion of Walker’s personal history that influences her role as implied author. My purpose in providing historical and biographical context is to show how *Meridian* is an embodiment of Martin Luther King Jr.’s nonviolent philosophy and a case study of sorts for Walker’s own womanist philosophy that preaches inclusion and equality in line with feminist ethics of care.

Civil Rights Movement in Context

Meridian is set in the South during the Civil Rights era. Meridian Hill’s work as a civil rights worker during the 1960s is central to the novel’s plot. Even if one were to consider just the calendar 1960s rather than the long sixties (1955-1974, as Todd Gitlin refers to the time period)

there are a host of events that would require scholarly attention. For the purposes of this study, this section's historical and cultural context will center on events and people that have direct bearing on events in Walker's *Meridian*: Freedom Summer and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black Panther party, and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X.

In addition to *Meridian*, Truman Held and Lynne Rabinowitz are civil rights workers, and their work allows Walker to fold the events of Freedom Summer into the novel. Coordinated by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and SNCC, Freedom Summer was a voter registration project in Mississippi during the summer of 1964. More than one thousand volunteers, mostly wealthy, white college students from northern states (like Lynne), descended on Mississippi to help African Americans register to vote. Robert Moses originally started the project to raise national awareness about the suppression of African Americans' votes, but the project was an extremely dangerous venture that proved fatal for some volunteers. Linda T. Wynn summarizes the physical cost: "By August 4, 1964, however, four people were killed, eighty were beaten, a thousand had been arrested, and 67 churches, homes, and businesses were set ablaze or bombed" (par. 1). Walker dramatizes Freedom Summer's violence, making its collateral violence *Meridian's* inspiration to volunteer for the Movement.

In the ironically titled chapter, "The Happy Mother," *Meridian* is walking past a house one day, and she notices it bustling with activity. *Meridian* is so desperate for purpose and identity at this point in the novel, she has considered killing her child whom she believes has stripped her of all opportunities for growth. She has retreated outside her home because she feels stifled within its walls. As she observes the house on her walk, she is intrigued that there are white young people present in this black house in a black neighborhood. As she is watching TV

one evening, she recognizes the house and learns of the need for local black volunteers in a voter registration drive. The next morning, she is watching the news on TV again and learns the house has been destroyed by a bombing overnight. Three children and several adults have been injured, and another adult is missing and presumed to be dead (70). This scene is important for a couple of reasons. First, it is Meridian's introduction to Freedom Summer and the dangerous work of the Civil Rights Movement. She marvels at the young people's awareness and intuition, questioning how they knew they had needed a guard. As she processes the reality of local racial discrimination and violence, Walker says it is on this day that Meridian "[becomes] aware of the past and present of the larger world" (70). Secondly, Walker uses this scene to suggest that this was not in fact the first time such racial violence occurred in their town. The narrator notes that Meridian had dreamt of Indians the night before, and then says "[Meridian] thought she had forgotten about them" (70). This phrasing serves a dual purpose. On one hand, Meridian is merely recalling a dream, as it is common to forget one's dreams upon awakening. On the other hand, she is *remembering* the past, the violence that stripped Native Americans of their land and culture. Walker is likening racial violence in the Civil Rights era to that on which the nation was established.

One month after the bombing, Meridian's awareness materializes into action, and she volunteers for the Movement at a time when she is sorely needed. As seen in the novel when Meridian, Truman, and Lynne visit sharecroppers, the civil rights workers' efforts were especially needed in rural areas where the tactics to deter African Americans from voting were strong. African Americans were subject to poll taxes, literacy tests, and physical violence (Wynn, par. 2). The work accomplished during Freedom Summer contributed to the passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As evidenced in Walker's own life as well as Meridian's fictional

life, the Voting Rights Act secured rights on paper, but civil rights workers were still needed after 1965 to bring African Americans' voting rights into fruition.

SNCC was instrumental in orchestrating Freedom Summer. The group was founded in 1960 during a student-led conference at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Famed civil rights activist, Ella Baker, helped launch the group and continued as an advisor. The group attracted students who were interested in nonviolent activism. They fought Jim Crow laws through civil disobedience, participating in sit-ins and freedom rides that were organized by CORE. The members adopted the phrase "jail, no bail." As a way to raise consciousness about racial injustice, students would spend time in jail rather than bond out. Walker alludes to nonviolent civil disobedience early in the novel in the chapter entitled "Sojourner."²¹ Nonviolent activism comes more easily to Meridian than Anne-Marion who is described as having to dig her nails into her skin to avoid reciprocating violence against a police officer who has shoved her (26). The description functions to characterize Anne-Marion, but it also makes readers aware of Meridian's nonviolent involvement in the Movement as a college student.

From 1961-1963, SNCC's primary objective was to help African Americans in the South register to vote. To counter the all-white Democratic Party in Mississippi, SNCC formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), hoping to have 68 delegates at the Democratic National Convention in 1964. They failed in this endeavor, only being allowed to send two delegates, and this failure of the MFDP negatively affected SNCC and caused division between those still interested in nonviolent means and those who aligned themselves with the penultimate chairman of the group, Stokely Carmichael, who advocated armed self-defense (Lucas, pars. 1-

²¹ Walker makes a more obvious reference to the "jail, no bail" methodology in the chapter entitled "Battle Fatigue." Both Truman and Meridian are arrested and beaten during a midnight march across the street from the jail where they are demonstrating against segregated hospitals. They stage the march in part to flood the jail and thus force the release of other protestors who had been arrested earlier (80).

7). The division SNCC members experienced is one Walker explores in *Meridian* as Meridian grapples with pledging herself to killing for the cause.

The group urging Meridian to commit to violent action is similar to the Black Panthers. Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panthers in 1966. They were a revolutionary, militant group whose first concern was with self-defense against the police. Their focus evolved to violence as a means of revolution (Lagasse, par. 2). Paul Lagasse describes their triad of goals: “The Black Panthers called for the establishment of an autonomous black state, armed resistance to white repression, and the provision of social welfare organizations in poor black areas” (par. 1). Members of the Black Panthers were victims of police harassment, which affected the group’s governance. A major internal rift occurred when Newton and Seale disagreed with Eldridge Cleaver about means of resistance. Newton and Seale wanted to abandon violent methods, but Cleaver insisted on holding to violent revolution as a means to accomplish their goals. In 1974, Seale resigned from the group while Newton fled to Cuba to avoid drug charges. The Black Panthers’ influence waned in the late 1970s (Lagasse, par. 4).

The rift that occurred in both SNCC and the Black Panthers reflects a larger division in civil rights’ ethos regarding appropriate means to achieve civil rights, and Meridian’s inability to pledge to kill for the Revolution reflects Walker’s discomfort with violent means. Martin Luther King, Jr. spearheaded nonviolent efforts, and Malcolm X is credited with accomplishing change through violent means. As I will show in the second section of this chapter, Walker was greatly influenced by King and revered his methodology as a model for the Civil Rights Movement. Just as Walker did as a civil rights worker, Meridian surrenders herself for a larger cause through nonviolent methods. Walker’s own experience and subsequently Meridian’s experience reveal that revolution comes through arduous self-transformation and commitment to respect and

equality rather than retributive violence that often spawns more violence. Since *Meridian* features both King and Malcolm X's methodologies, however, I provide a brief description of them here.

G. L. Kaster refers to Martin Luther King, Jr. as the most influential civil rights leader (par. 1). King was committed to achieving social change through nonviolent methods. He was concerned about racial injustice and inequality as well as poverty relief and the Vietnam War. He organized the Montgomery bus boycott and was the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC). Through his work with the SCLC, King advocated for nonviolent protest. Kaster writes about the efficacy of such methods: "In each case nonviolent protest met with police violence in televised scenes that built popular support for civil rights legislation" (par. 5). His arrest during the Birmingham movement only bolstered his influence, and King's "Letter from a Birmingham City Jail" is considered one of the most influential texts of the Civil Rights Movement. During the summer after his arrest in 1963, King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. At this time, King was president of SCLC; the speech emphasized the organization's agenda and King's belief in the possibility of freedom and the importance of inclusiveness. King led another successful civil rights campaign in Selma in 1965 after having won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. His popularity waned, though, in 1965 when he opposed the Vietnam War, and his nonviolent methodology was being rejected in favor of Malcolm X and the Black Power movement. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968. As seen throughout the novel, his nonviolent methods are influential to *Meridian's* ethos. Indeed, *Meridian* is panicked that people seem so materialistic and unchanged by King's death (211). She is encouraged, though, when she attends a church service and hears the speaker say he "won't pray any longer because there is a lot of work to do"

(213). His words speak to the need for action, for private convictions to become public deeds that will build the Beloved Community of which King dreamed.

Walker is clear about King's influence on her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. In "Choice: A Tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," she writes about the first time she saw King. She was watching television and saw him being arrested without violent resistance, and she ruminates about that moment's effect on her: "At the moment I saw his resistance I knew I would never be able to live in this country without resisting everything that sought to disinherit me, and I would never be forced away from the land of my birth without a fight" (*In Search* 143). Walker reveres King as a "hero" and attributes to him the act of giving African Americans home, quite literally, a "continuity of place"; Walker notes that without that space, community would be a fleeting notion (*In Search* 145). King's influence is clear in *Meridian*, for his nonviolent methodology is the base for *Meridian*'s nonviolent resistance.

Unlike *Meridian*, Truman Held does not struggle to commit to violent action for the sake of the cause. He is annoyed when *Meridian* continues to question her place in the Revolution if she cannot commit to killing for it (206). Even though by the 1970s Truman seems to reduce the Revolution of the sixties to a fad, his ethos is more closely aligned with Malcolm X's. Malcolm X opposed Martin Luther King, Jr. and SCLC's nonviolent methods. When I consider Malcolm X's background, I am not surprised he had an intense desire for violent retaliation against injustice. His house was burned down at night by night riders when he was four. His father died two years later under suspicious circumstances. He was put into foster care and then sent to a detention center after he put a tack on his teacher's chair (Queen, pars. 2-3). Malcolm X was jailed for running a burglary ring and paroled after six years. This time in jail, however, changed the course of his life. One inmate turned him onto scholarship, which is when Malcolm X began

studying Elijah Muhammed's teachings and joined the Nation of Islam (NOI). He recruited for the NOI in Detroit, and he became a key figure in the group. He had no tolerance for white society or for blacks who favored integration. Malcolm X eventually broke with the NOI in 1964 when he came to believe that there was a great disparity between true Muslim teachings and the NOI (Queen, par. 16). Like King, he was assassinated, so he was stripped of the opportunity to complete his self-transformation. Also like King, he remains one of the most influential figures in the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S.

It is fitting to close this general section by emphasizing once more the Movement's biggest influence on Walker and *Meridian*. Walker admires Martin Luther King, Jr. for his commitment to "nonviolence, love, and brotherhood" in the midst of struggle (*In Search* 121). Walker connected to King because what he promised was immaterial: namely, freedom, courage, and the right to live anywhere and have a meaningful job (*In Search* 124). In short, King promised people the right to be who they wanted to be, and through his influence the Movement bolstered Walker's belief in herself and what she could be and achieve (124). This knowledge of her right to freedom is how Walker judges the success of the Civil Rights Movement: "Just knowing has meant everything to me. Knowing has pushed me out into the world, into college, into places, into people" (*In Search* 125). Because of the Civil Rights Movement, Walker got involved in activism and advocacy—work to which she is still committed. She credits King with awakening her to the Movement, and her involvement with the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF) in the 1960s was important work in its own right, but the literature she produced as a result of that work, especially *Meridian*, is arguably even more important for its ability to continue to raise readers' consciousness and inspire nonviolent action.

Walker's Involvement with The Movement as a Path to Authorship

Walker's biography affects her narrative strategy as she weaves her own life experiences (loosely) and principles (more concretely) into the text. Evelyn C. White's biography of Walker, *Alice Walker: A Life*, is Walker's only sanctioned biography, and it provides a picture of Walker's own life during the Civil Rights Movement, revealing similarities between her own life and *Meridian's* characters' lives. Acknowledging pertinent aspects of Walker's biography can help readers see the way in which she shapes the narrative as implied author, thereby influencing the way readers enter the text as ethical agents.²² With a grant from Charles Merrill, Walker left New York City in 1966 at age 22 to work with the LDF in Mississippi (130). She wanted to go to Senegal but knew the domestic need was great. Walker thought of children whose parents could not vote, who were given insufficient resources marred with racial epithets, and she knew she was needed at this moment in history in the South instead of Africa. Ultimately, Walker went to Mississippi because she felt it was a "life-or-death" matter to do racial justice work there (134). In many ways, the decision to join the LDF changed the course of her life just as accepting the call to volunteer for the Revolution changes *Meridian's*.

In an obvious way, going to Mississippi affected Walker's personal life, for that is how she met Mel Leventhal, whom she would later marry and with whom she would share a daughter, Rebecca. Leventhal, a white Jewish man also coming from New York City, was working in 1966 as an intern with the LDF (135). Walker met Leventhal at a restaurant on her first day in Jackson (137). Walker's job with the LDF was to take depositions from

²² As noted in my introduction, James Phelan's third ethical situation involves the implied author. Phelan notes that the implied author's narrative strategy affects how the audience responds ethically (23). Walker's narrative strategy of tracing *Meridian's* transformation as an ethical agent favors nonviolent resistance in the face of racial violence and discrimination. Her personal affinity for King's methods, as well as her life experience, influence how she poises the authorial audience to ethically respond to the text.

sharecroppers in Greenwood, MS. Just as Meridian is met with the threat of violence for the work she was doing as a civil rights worker, Leventhal and Walker faced similar threats. They barely made it out of Greenwood one night, having Klan members tailing their vehicle. The NAACP arranged an “accident” to help them avoid the Klan members and get on the highway (142). This experience drew them close; however, it was not where Leventhal truly gained Walker’s trust and admiration.

On one occasion, Walker and Leventhal were caught swimming together with another white female civil rights worker. The white female attempted to cling to Leventhal when authorities began questioning them, but Leventhal stood by Walker, and White notes that this is the moment Leventhal gained Walker’s trust (142). Walker proposed to Leventhal while they were visiting her family in Georgia, and she considered it a political act for them to be legally wed, especially in light of how many southern states still had anti-miscegenation laws (154). They got married on March 17, 1967, during a civil ceremony in the New York City Family Court, and then they travelled back to Mississippi. In Walker’s words, “We came to Mississippi to kill the fear it engendered as a place where black life was terrifyingly hard, pitifully cheap” (qtd. in White 157). They were the first registered interracial couple in Mississippi, and their relationship and struggles with racism are fictionalized through *Meridian*’s black Truman Held and white, Jewish Lynne Rabinowitz.²³

²³ As difficult as life is for Lynne in Mississippi, she asks Truman to go back there after their daughter has died and he has confessed that he does not desire her anymore (237). It is as if Walker is acknowledging the South is simultaneously a place of death but also a place where one can successfully fight to survive—that the struggle for one’s identity is so intense, the person feels more alive there than anywhere else. This can be read as a concession, for in Walker’s relationship, she was the one who did not want to remain in Mississippi; however, she is acknowledging its power to forge connection amid strife.

Even through the racial strife Walker experienced throughout childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, she still believed hatred would not birth freedom for blacks (White 176).²⁴ Instead, Walker maintained blacks must “find the courage to claim their own souls” (qtd. in White 177). In this vein, Fannie Lou Hamer and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were models for her. Hamer’s model as a freedom fighter was one of racial uplift. Hamer was a sharecropper but was evicted and arrested when she attempted to vote.²⁵ She employed tactics that would promote a democracy where both blacks and whites would be raised up. As seen through Meridian’s character, Walker was also influenced by King’s nonviolent methodology. Walker clearly conveys to White that she did not want to kill white people. After reading *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, famed revolutionary poet, Nikki Giovanni, came to spend a few days with Walker in Jackson because she was so intrigued by the work. At some point during that visit, Giovanni flatly asked Walker how Walker could “lay [sic] down every night with somebody [you] wanted to kill” (198). As Walker tells White, she took offense at the question, not just because she loved her husband but also because Giovanni’s question flippantly dismissed the difficulty Walker and Leventhal faced in their interracial relationship²⁶ and made an assumption about Walker’s stance on violence and the Civil Rights Movement.

²⁴ Walker’s belief in the inefficacy of hatred is manifested in *Meridian*. Through her protagonist, Walker expresses the belief that Revolution is built on teaching rather than war and violence (205). Meridian claims people “want to be taught how to live” (206). This line is significant to the text from a hermeneutical ethics perspective, for it functions in a framed way: the novel itself is teaching readers how to live a life of nonviolent resistance.

²⁵ As a daughter of sharecroppers in Georgia, Hamer’s activism influenced Walker and inspired her work with the LDF, taking depositions from evicted sharecroppers who had also attempted to register to vote. Readers see this influence lived out in the narrative through Meridian’s work as a Civil Rights worker, helping disenfranchised blacks register to vote.

²⁶ Structurally, the narrative sequence where Tommy Odds rapes Lynne and then brings three of their mutual friends to Lynne and Truman’s house the next day illustrates the duress under which Lynne was living. Obviously, Lynne is not a stand-in for Walker; however, Lynne’s character functions to illustrate the difficulty of being a partner in an interracial marriage in Mississippi during the Civil Rights era. Lynne is ostracized as a white woman in the Movement. Every facet of her life is crumbling, including her marriage to Truman, and she is becoming increasingly reclusive, thereby adding to her isolation.

While Walker points out that she did not want to kill white people, the pressure she was facing took an enormous toll on her spirit. Her friend, Clotie Graves, describes the 1970s in Jackson as putting Walker on the “brink of a spiritual collapse” (White 207). Walker experienced firsthand the demoralizing effects of Civil Rights work in Mississippi, and she crafts a narrative where Meridian must fight racism and its paralyzing effects to achieve spiritual transformation. Possibly, Walker puts Meridian on a spiritual journey to cultivate the one she sorely needed as well. Both Walker and her main character have had to navigate a life filled with racial hate directed squarely at them, yet neither could commit to killing for the revolution.²⁷ Their souls longed to be free—free of hate and injustice—and full of love.

To nurture her own soul, Walker had to retreat from Mississippi. Similar to Meridian leaving her young child, Walker left her young daughter, Rebecca, in Mississippi to continue her grant at Radcliffe while writing *Meridian* (White 225).²⁸ Leventhal acknowledges this geographical separation as a crossroads for their marriage (223). Walker returned to Mississippi in 1973, but she gave Leventhal an ultimatum concerning their marriage: they must leave Mississippi. This was a difficult decision for Leventhal because he was extremely successful and doing vitally important work for the Civil Rights Movement. In this way, Leventhal was like Lynne, and Walker was like Truman. In the chapter, “Truman and Lynne: Time in the South,” Walker says, “Truman had had enough of the Movement and the South. But not Lynne” (136). Like Leventhal, the reality of unfinished justice work drew Lynne to Mississippi. Leventhal agreed to leave, though, and the young family moved to New York City (262). At this juncture,

²⁷ Karen F. Stein affirms this point in “*Meridian: Alice Walker’s Critique of Revolution*.” Stein claims that Walker is modeling transformation instead of revolution in the novel. While death is present throughout the novel, Meridian (and arguably Walker) realizes it is not death to which she needs to pledge herself but life.

²⁸ This is an uncomfortable biographical connection to the book, for Meridian makes a clean break but Walker does not. It is as if Walker as implied author is suggesting Meridian’s actions were preferable for achieving transformation, yet Walker could not abandon Rebecca.

Walker has the benefit of a willing partner, which is something Meridian never enjoyed. In some ways, Meridian's isolation allowed her to complete her work, but the novel is also clear in showing the ways she desperately needed connection.

Humanity's need for connection is an important theme that Walker builds into *Meridian*. As a civil rights worker, Walker needed connection with others to weather the difficult work and vile racism she encountered, and in *Meridian* she creates characters who also need connection. As White notes, "*Meridian* [examines]...the price blacks (and whites) paid as they struggled to achieve a common humanity during the civil rights era" (284). White's term "common humanity" is a fascinating one in light of the aforementioned authors, Mark Charles and Martha Nussbaum. First, Charles' use of the term "common memory" is significant to my study, because there is a sense that literature forges a new shared experience for disparate readers, creating in them a common memory (for more detail, see my introduction). The struggle to achieve a common humanity, as White mentions, speaks to the need for empathy and shared experience, qualities affirmed through a feminist ethic of care. Achieving common humanity coincides with the creation of a common memory, for common memory is impossible without acknowledging others' needs and one's complicity in past wrongs. Creating common memory involves recognizing individuals society would rather dehumanize. Secondly, Nussbaum writes of cultivating humanity in *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. She argues three capacities are needed to cultivate humanity: critical self-examination, a binding to others with ties of concern, and narrative imagination (9-13). While Nussbaum's theories about cultivating humanity are related explicitly to liberal education, they implicitly relate to what Walker accomplishes in *Meridian* as she melds her own life experiences

and observations of others into a narrative that prompts readers to acknowledge their role in enacting justice with compassion and without engaging in violent means.

One such narrative influence is Ruby Doris Smith Robinson and her work with SNCC. Robinson graduated from Spelman in 1965²⁹ and was an important SNCC member, serving as the only female executive secretary; however, she was treated badly by the group.³⁰ She was influential in instituting SNCC's "jail no bail" policy but died in 1967 at the age of 25 from cancer (White 287). White notes that Walker crafted *Meridian's* nonviolent principles from her observation of Ruby Robinson and other freedom fighters like her as well as Walker's own experience (287). Nonviolent activism is a bedrock theme in the novel, and Walker is quoted as saying, "[*Meridian*] is a sort of corner of [Ruby's] life that I saw in passing" (qtd. in White 286). Just as Walker's time at Spelman influenced her, *Meridian's* time at Saxon College changes the way she sees herself and her role in the Movement. In her description of *Meridian*, White claims, "It is in her reclaiming of self that *Meridian* begins to probe the deep contours of race and responsibility" (288). In a way, both Walker's and *Meridian's* path to self-transformation begin in their respective, restrictive colleges.

In her biography, White reveals some of Walker's other narrative influences as well. There are obvious intertextualities present in *Meridian* that speak to the text's cultural context. White describes an intertextuality between *Meridian* and King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" through a carnival motif. King tells his children they are not permitted to go to Funtown because of the color of their skin. As implied author, Walker creates a similar scene in *Meridian*

²⁹ Walker attended Spelman from 1961 to 1963, so their time at Spelman intersected.

³⁰ Susan Danielson believes *Meridian* is a feminist critique of the Civil Rights Movement (318). She claims feminist ideals exposed weaknesses in the Civil Rights Movement to enact social change (328-29). Considering Walker's adoration of Ruby Robinson and her disdain for how Robinson was treated by SNCC members, this is a valid reading.

in which the children are not allowed to view Marilene O'Shay, the mummified white woman, except on "Negro Day." As I will describe in more detail later in the chapter, Meridian stands in front of a tank to allow the children to see the spectacle when it is not their sanctioned day. As White argues, this act is one way in which Meridian "celebrates a rich black heritage" (290). This celebration is in line with Walker's womanist vision to articulate black folk expression. In addition to King, Walker was influenced by Jean Toomer's "Blue Meridian" and its message of unity. The poem's speaker expresses a desire to see people's consciousness shaped by "growth, transformation, and love" (qtd. in White 292). Those three entities are central to Walker's womanist vision as well her construction of the narrative, and they are the primary reason *Meridian* can be read through a feminist ethics of care lens.

Walker published "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" during the winter of 1966-67 and republished the piece in her 1983 collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Her sentiments in this award-winning essay speak to her stance as *Meridian's* implied author a decade later when the novel was published. In the essay, she expresses her belief in the success of the Movement for its ability to have changed people's mindsets and reinforced the need to continue the struggle for equality. While Walker concedes the Movement did not provide many individual, material gains, for her, it offered something greater: knowledge of her condition as a free person (*In Search* 121). The Movement provided her a path to raised-consciousness and hope, and the evidence of those immaterial gains are evident in the story she weaves as *Meridian's* implied author. Walker constructs a protagonist who is weak to the point of paralysis yet overcomes trauma to be involved in the Movement, fighting racism and transforming herself.

Meridian Hill: An Ideal, Transformative Ethical Agent

Much of the criticism on *Meridian* is generally focused on Meridian's discovery of self (McDowell, Nadel, and McGowan), the function of grief and atonement in the novel (Duck and Jones), or the novel's connection to the wider Civil Rights Movement (Stein, Pifer, Danielson, and Tewkesbury). The criticism largely focuses on Meridian as a transformed figure but does not examine the painful stages that led to that point, and feminist ethics of care is fitting analytical lens through which to explore Meridian's journey to becoming a transformative ethical agent. The place where that lens is most needed is the narrative gap regarding Meridian's ability to kill for the Revolution, for the reading of the gap has direct bearing on readers' subsequent ethical actions. In this chapter's final section, I will explore that gap through Leona Toker and Carol Gilligan's work, and then I will trace Meridian's transformation through three stages: failed care, paralyzed care, and finally informed care.

The only time Meridian can pronounce her willingness to kill for the Revolution is when she is leaving the church service in the chapter entitled "Camara." Meridian has heard a stirring account of injustice from a father who lost his son to racial violence, and she is overcome with communal grief and rage. Driven by these emotions and guided by a communal spirit, Meridian has a breakthrough: "For she understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably *not* her own" (219-20). Just as soon as Meridian makes this promise to herself, she questions it and attributes her commitment to kill to the emotive setting in which she made the decision. The text goes on to say that Meridian does not consistently promise to kill for the Revolution, sometimes abandoning the commitment altogether.

Meridian's questioning of her role in the Revolution is important to her own transformation as well as readers' response. While others like Anne-Marion move beyond bloodthirsty revolution, Meridian cannot. Ten years have passed since Meridian was involved in activism at Saxon; a new decade has dawned, but Meridian still surrounds herself with people whose needs are unmet, and she knows there is still a place for ethical action. She feels she must come behind the revolutionaries, clean off their blood, and sing the songs they are unable to sing. Her role is to be a voice of the past still relevant to the future, and readers perceive this new commitment through first person narration: "For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul. If I can only do that, my role will not have been a useless one after all" (221). Meridian's self-discovery is a gift to readers, for she exemplifies how to build a common memory by listening to the voice of the past to effect change in the present. This novel intercedes for readers stuck in a cycle of racial violence brought on by bigotry and inequity, giving hope for social change.

Leona Toker's work can serve as a bridge between the previous section's narrative ethics lens focused on implied author and this section's feminist ethics of care theoretical lens. In *Eloquent Reticence*, Toker examines absences or gaps in novels. She argues that the narrative creates the conditions in which the readers enter the text as ethical agents. The conditions are not merely about the plot; form also influences readings of the text. This is especially true in *Meridian*, for Walker as implied author employs circular narration, rarely giving specific settings. Often, the reader must infer the time that has elapsed since Meridian and Truman were together. Toker argues that readers reap consciousness-raising as a by-product of reading (4). Their efforts to determine gaps and indeterminacies reveal something about themselves. As

Toker explains, gaps in the structure of the text serve as mirrors to the audience (5). What readers see in the mirror affects how they respond. Gaps test readers on their appropriations and make them question the narratives they contrive (7). Ultimately, careful and subsequent readings of a text produce a more complex understanding and a deeper call to ethical action. In *Meridian*, a novel built on relationships and self-discovery during a tumultuous time in United States' history, readers' call to ethical action involves care and social justice—a call to enact social and economic equity— which is why it is useful to examine the text through narrative ethics as well as a feminist ethic of care.

Most contemporary feminist care ethicists point to Carol Gilligan's 1982, germinal work, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, when explaining their entry point into their own work. In that text, Gilligan describes an ethic of care, noting that when operating from a care perspective, despite power differentials, people will be treated fairly. As she explains, when an ethic of care is valued, interconnection, inclusion, equality, and safety are promoted (63). A feminist ethic of care esteems relationships, voice, and interdependence, and *Meridian* is an ideal ethical agent through this ethics of care lens. Eva Feder Kittay describes a moral agent as “a caring self, who can look past her own immediate needs and desires and takes on the cares of the other as her own” (par. 9). *Meridian*, through her work as a civil rights worker, perfectly fits that description. Kittay goes on to explain that the purpose of an ethic of care is to connect to the “struggles of marginalized, subordinated, and endangered others” (par. 14). Once she has experienced her personal awakening, *Meridian* constantly seeks out the disenfranchised and works to meet their needs; unfortunately, she is unsuccessful because she does not truly know how to care for others.

Failed Care

As mentioned, the novel is told using circular narration, and Meridian is unwell through significant portions of the text. True to a hermeneutical ethical reading, the reader is meant to distinguish between periods when she is unwell due to self-loathing and periods of paralysis due to extreme compassion. The latter periods are post-awakening when she has accepted her role as a perennial outsider, but the former periods are exacerbated by her failed attempts at care.

When Meridian witnesses another who is suffering in isolation, she attempts to break free from her personal strongholds and take up responsibility for another. In essence, she is launched into feminist ethics of care when faced with social or economic injustice. The Wild Child is a young teenage girl who has lived on the streets her entire life. She wears what she finds and eats garbage. She certainly does not live up to the aesthetic and moral standards expected of Saxon College women. When Meridian learns someone has impregnated Wild Child, she takes her into her dorm room and attempts to help her, much to the dismay of the house mother, who tries to tell her Wild Child is not her responsibility. Meridian does not accept this and attempts to find housing or schooling for her. When Wild Child is escaping from Meridian's dorm, she is struck by a speeding car and killed (25). Meridian's advocacy can be characterized by a feminist ethic of care. As Kittay explains, "An ethics of care is fundamentally other-directed, but it is an ethic that understands that our own well-being is never entirely independent of the well-being of the other" (par. 9) It is telling that the morning after Meridian brings Wild Child in, she makes calls to schools for special children and then schools for unwed mothers (25). It is as if Meridian cannot go on with her own schooling until she knows Wild Child can attend school because Meridian knows how detrimental it was to her spirit when she was unable to attend school after her son's birth (67-68). Meridian is more concerned about Wild Child's physical and spiritual

well-being than her own, but since Meridian's well-being is so fragile and tied to others in tenuous ways, her attempts at care fail. Also relevant to *Meridian*, Kittay says further, "An ethics of care understands responsibility to be bound by the connection to and an understanding of the needs and wants of the other" (par. 9). When Meridian first sees Wild Child, she experiences paralysis (24).³¹ She witnesses another who is in danger and not cared for, and her own well-being is affected. The house mother tries to deter her from the sense of responsibility she felt, but Meridian feels connected to Wild Child and compelled to help her.

Even after Wild Child has died, Meridian's sense of responsibility to her does not wane. With five of her classmates, Meridian is determined to carry Wild Child's casket through campus and give her a proper funeral in the Saxon chapel. Saxon's president, however, has forbidden the funeral to be held in the chapel and posted two guards outside the chapel's doors. When denied entrance, they express their discontent by taking off their jewelry (38). This may seem like an odd act of resistance, but what they are doing is shedding their outward adornment, that which marks them as proper Saxon women. They are demonstrative in their hatred toward patriarchy and hypocrisy. Their hatred boils over, and they end up destroying the Sojourner tree where they have brought Wild Child for a funeral. This visceral scene, which includes them singing "We Shall Overcome," is marked by interdependence, a hallmark of feminist ethics of care. This group of students collectively recognizes the disconnect between their privileged educational system and setting and the outside world. They are protesting a system that refuses care to a young woman in dire need; they are acknowledging the intersecting factors that placed her in a precarious position in the first place. Together, these students riot against the patriarchal system

³¹ Throughout the novel, Meridian is ill and drained by her advocacy work. In "Reading the Body: Alice Walker's *Meridian* and the Archeology of the Self," Adam Nadel explains this paradox of Meridian's illness. The shedding of her body actually makes her more powerful to do the Movement's work and offer healing (63).

that narrowly defines how they must conduct themselves as young women, all while ignoring the needs of those on the other side of the campus' ornamental fence.

Meridian exhibits interdependence in the novel's opening scene as well. When the novel begins in Chicokema, Georgia, Meridian is staring down a white tank. She is leading black children through the street, protecting them from harm as she demands they be allowed to see the mummified woman even though "their day" to see her is not until Thursday (3). She wants the children to see Marilene O'Shay, the mummified woman, so that they will realize it is a fraudulent spectacle. Her act constitutes feminist ethics of care, for she is simultaneously protecting the children and working to raise their consciousness. Meridian wants these poor, black children to be aware of the lies they're being told—an innocuous lie about a mummified woman that merely seeks to take their money and also a dangerous lie that tells them they are somehow unworthy or unequal to their white peers. Sandra Laugier, a French feminist care ethicist, writes of vulnerability, defining it as an "'ordinary life' context where human beings find their needs and interests, and fragilities are exposed" (par. 6). This scene exposes the children's vulnerability to a vile institution, white supremacy, that desires to keep blacks within its stronghold even after legislation forbids it. Unfortunately, while the event constitutes successful activism, it is a failed attempt at care, for Meridian orchestrates the entire event, deciding for the black townspeople what their children need.

Paralyzed Care

Meridian is the ideal person to help others initiate back into society because she has spent so much time as an outsider that she does not fear that space. That has not always been the case, however. Throughout her childhood, adolescence, and college years, Meridian found herself paralyzed and unable to care for herself. Feeling excluded by her mother at home drove her to

seek attention elsewhere.³² As a young teenager, she is raped routinely at a funeral home. Sex is merely about bodily control, which is why she has so much difficulty intimately connecting to Eddie when they get married. Her marital suffering is compounded by the lack of maternal love and guidance she received from her mother. Her life experiences pre-college (and arguably during college) set her up for self-loathing and internal anguish. She suffers physically too as she is beaten during protests (97). In the chapter “Driven Snow,” the reader is confronted with the image of blanketed snow. Meridian is sickened by both the injustice she has witnessed on both Saxon’s campus and as part of the Atlanta Movement as well as within her own past. She needs forgiveness. She needs to be covered, stripped of guilt, and purified; however, she is lacking an integral feminist ethic of care value—interdependence—and without it, she suffers in isolation, weighed down by what Walker calls an “almost primeval guilt.” Carol Gilligan notes the need for interdependence, particularly concerning moral decision making (147). This feminist ethic of care recognizes that responsibility is both for the self and the other. Individualism and isolation lead to problematic behavior, as is so evident in Meridian’s life; however, interdependence allows for what Gilligan calls a “collective life.” Lacking this collective life is paralyzing for Meridian, and the text describes her daily turmoil by saying, “...the majority of her waking moments [seem] fragmented, surreal” (95).

Much of the paralyzing guilt Meridian experiences at Saxon is due to the decision she had to make in order to attend the school. In the chapter entitled “Battle Fatigue,” Meridian decides to give her son, Eddie Jr. / Rundi, away and attend Saxon College in Atlanta. As she is trying to explain her decision to her mother but is met with a guilt trip, Meridian declares, “How

³² Meridian’s mother is cruel to her, blaming Meridian for the lost sense of identity she has experienced since becoming a mother. When she asks Meridian if she has stolen anything, Walker makes it clear Mrs. Hill believes Meridian has stolen her life.

can I take care of Eddie Jr. anyway? I can't even take care of myself" (85). For a year, Meridian has been volunteering at the Movement house. She has been doing noble work, proving her commitment to the Movement, but Meridian's mother refuses to accept that motherhood is a role someone can abandon if they feel unfit for it. Meridian's declaration of not being able to care for herself is a cry for help, but her mother refuses to acknowledge it. This chapter is tragic from a feminist ethics of care perspective, for Meridian is suffering in isolation at this time.³³ She is experiencing the trauma of failing to bond with her child, but she is not offered emotional support from anyone, especially not from her own mother. As she is considering what to do with Eddie Jr., she contemplates not giving him away but instead committing infanticide and then suicide (89). Much like Walker herself, who wrestled with suicidal thoughts after her abortion as a senior at Sarah Lawrence College, Meridian reeled from self-hatred. In the penultimate paragraph of the "Battle Fatigue" chapter, a voice is described as pervading Meridian's thoughts and actions: "A voice that cursed her existence...the voice that said terrible things about her lack of value—was her own voice. It was talking to her, and it was full of hate" (90-91). Her self-hatred prevented her from caring for herself, much less her child, and she could not trust her own voice. The notion of voice—both being able to speak and be responded to—is significant to a feminist ethics of care. Without a supportive voice, people remain unwell, suffering in isolation.

Meridian's best chance for a supportive voice is Miss Winter, who is the only adult who offers Meridian selfless relational support. When Meridian is unable to deliver her required speech, it is Miss Winter, not Meridian's mother, who offers comfort and compassion.³⁴ In the

³³ In the chapter, "Clouds," which precedes "Battle Fatigue," the narrator reminds readers, "She was still only seventeen. A drop-out from high school, a deserted wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law" (73). Her entire identity is wrapped in roles she does not desire.

³⁴ In this fascinating scene, Miss Winter experiences release in her offer of compassion. She assures Meridian that she too had to give the same speech and that it was patently false when she delivered it too. In confessing that, she feels a symbolic breeze and realizes it is too hot for her mink coat (127). She removes her coat and simultaneously sheds the white supremacist, patriarchal expectations that have been piled on her shoulders.

following scene, Miss Winter is attending to Meridian during a period of paralysis. In Meridian's dreamlike state, she is wracked with guilt for burdening her mother, and Walker stages the ultimate release: "Instinctively, as if Meridian were her own child, Miss Winter answered, close to her ear on the pillow, 'I forgive you'" (131). Leigh Anne Duck writes of the value of an activist community to bring restoration and justice to those who, like Meridian, have suffered psychological pain. Duck argues, "Ultimately, then, Meridian learns to view personal pain as neither fixed nor solely internal; rather, it becomes a fact that facilitates interpersonal dialogue and desire for social change" (463). She is no stranger to suffering, so through a long period of healing and awakening, she can intercede for others and does not need to engage in violence to achieve her advocacy.³⁵

Meridian's desire for social change is woven into the text in scenes that follow the one with Miss Winter chronologically. One of the most important ones is in the chapter entitled "Questions." Meridian's ethos is built on equality and care for others, and at this point, she has almost learned how to do that adequately. Meridian takes responsibility to connect and protect disenfranchised children without inciting violence. A little boy has died while swimming in a ditch that suddenly flooded when the reservoir, erected by white city officials who closed the public swimming pool after integration, drained off (208). This five-year-old boy was not the first to die in this manner. Walker implies these deaths were an annual occurrence; however, Meridian refuses to mourn ineffectually as others do. For her, it is not enough to cry aloud or visit the family to give condolences. She marches through town the bloated corpse that has been

³⁵ In "Atonement and Release in Alice Walker's *Meridian*," Martha J. McGowen argues that *Meridian* is an experiment in interrogating the root of suffering as to bring awakening (25). She acknowledges victimization throughout the novel but believes Meridian's personal transformation represents greater possibility for hope among black women. Relevant to this study, Meridian's transformation opens a space for atonement, release, and ultimately societal transformation.

stuck in the sewer for two days and places him beside the mayor's gavel (209). In exchange, she urges the people to vote, to exercise resistance in the way they can. This act of delivering the black boy's dead body to white city officials is a political act. In the words of Shermaine M. Jones, Meridian is engaging a "shareable affect" as she empathizes with black citizens' grief and holds whites' consciences accountable for the loss (186).³⁶ This scene should cause readers to question their complicity in similar occurrences. This little boy dies because white officials, who are content letting their children swim in their own private pools, do not want to have a public pool if they have to share it with black citizens. Anyone who voted for those officials is supporting their agenda to strategically resist integration. In contemporary times, people must weigh inadvertent actions to which their vote contributes, especially when those actions cause violence or harm. Readers commit to an ethic of care and interdependence that demand more than merely following laws that might be unjust. This higher standard requires people to consider decisions holistically, not ignoring the people who will be affected by those decisions. Being an ethical agent who is committed to care means people do more than blindly follow rules and tick boxes that make their consciences clear. They grapple with how one act will affect another, and this thoughtfulness and intentionality leads to better care.

Informed Care

Meridian's actions to hold officials accountable for the little boy's death reflect her commitment to the community in which she lives. As seen throughout the novel, Meridian lives among the people she serves and shows them compassion. In a way, she engages in feminist

³⁶ Jones links grief and rage in the same emotional register. She examines rage as a "moral imperative and political consciousness" (184). She argues that grief and rage can serve a political purpose, and this is certainly true in Meridian's advocacy, particularly in this scene. Meridian is taking up responsibility for this boy's life, engaging in an outward expression of grief and empathy; however, she is also forcing the officials to view the injustice caused by their selfish, racist neglect.

participatory action research.³⁷ As she interacts with neighbors, she finds out what they need and works to meet their material needs. In meeting material needs, she works to nurture their soul as well, and she is equipping them to engage in social change. In the “Travels,” “Treasure,” and “Pilgrimages” chapters near the end of the novel, readers witness three such instances, and I will treat each separately.

First, she brings groceries to a family tying dirty newspapers together, readying them for sale in the winter (225). From the chapter’s onset, readers know this is an impoverished family: their son does not have shoes, their home is in visible disrepair, and furniture is scant. This family is financially hurting because the wife, Agnes, is deathly ill, and the husband, Johnny, has been fired from his job at the copper plant because he would not keep the window in front of his station covered. Meridian and Truman encourage the family to vote. When they question the usefulness of the vote, Meridian tells them, “It may be useless. Or maybe it can be the beginning of the use of your voice” (225). Johnny sends them away, for he does not see a correlation between the vote and the material conditions of his life. Meridian returns with groceries, expecting nothing in return. She simply saw a material need and met it. Johnny visits Meridian and Truman some time later; he is now willing to record his name in Meridian’s ledger under the column “WILL BE BRAVE ENOUGH TO VOTE” (226). Meridian’s ability to offer care is effective because it is reliant on understanding what the other person needs, and her patience yields dividends as Johnny becomes convinced of the value of using his voice.

Next, in “Treasure,” when she visits a pair of aging sisters named Miss Margaret and Little Sister Lucille, readers get the sense that Meridian prioritizes helping people improve the

³⁷ In formal participatory action research (PAR), the researcher(s) and participants work together to make decisions about how to conduct the study. The point is to impact material lives, particularly of marginalized people, leading to social action/justice. In the novel, Meridian is engaging in PAR by not assuming she knows what people need but instead listening to them express needs and then responding to needs.

material conditions of their lives, knowing that in turn improves their spiritual well-being (232). Miss Margaret is distraught because even though she is around 70 years old, she believes she has gotten pregnant by Rims Mott, who is about 30 years her junior and presumably a scoundrel. Little Sister Lucille's cruel judgment intensifies Miss Margaret's emotional strife. Lucille pronounces to Meridian and Truman, "I knowed better than to let *myself* get messed up" (230). Through sobs, Miss Margaret tells Meridian and Truman she does not want to marry Rims, and she wants to destroy her bed as if to erase the evidence of her affair with him. It does not make sense for Miss Margaret to burn her bed and land, but Meridian does not judge. She just helps Miss Margaret push her bed out of the house. Afterward, Truman and Meridian accompany her to a doctor's appointment to check on her leg that she injured while pushing the bed and also to confirm she is not pregnant. It is particularly important that Meridian is with Miss Margaret at the doctor's office. Meridian has been alone through horrifying procedures, and her willingness to offer Miss Margaret emotional support is indicative of her commitment to offering care. Meridian listens and knows Miss Margaret needs confirmation that she is not pregnant, so she provides the path to relief. Like Johnny, having had her need met, Miss Margaret also comes to sign her name on Meridian's ledger.

Finally, in "Pilgrimage," she and Truman visit a thirteen-year-old girl who is imprisoned for killing her baby (235). The chapter's opening line speaks to Meridian's duty as an ethical agent: "And so they must go to the prison. And so they must" (233). The pair has visited adults who are qualified to register to vote; however, this visit is marked by compassion, for Meridian certainly remembers that she too considered infanticide when she was so hopelessly lost at home with her own baby before giving him away. Unlike Johnny, Agnes, Margaret, or Lucille, this imprisoned teenager has nothing reciprocal to offer. Meridian approaches this visit in a mindful

way, selecting magazine photos she imagines the girl will enjoy. They are photos of outdoor scenes and one red apple contrasted on a white page, which prompts the girl to conflate the apple with the chunk of her baby's cheek she bit off before strangling her. The girl then correlates the chunk of flesh with her own heart. Her dialogue reveals she is traumatized by her own actions, but she is suffering alone as a societal outcast. Meridian does not have anything to offer, for what the girl needs is immaterial. She is seeking absolution from a failed societal system. The poem Meridian pens upon leaving reveals that the source of guilt and shame is external; others strip people of their innocence (235). Each of the people in these three chapters has a story of injustice, and through offering to listen, Meridian is engaging in a feminist ethic of care conveying to each of them that they deserve to be heard and included in society. Significantly, Truman is present with Meridian during each of these visits; however, readers do not get the sense that he is activated as an ethical agent as Meridian is. He is merely a civil rights worker, attempting to register people to vote. He does not view the visits as opportunities to improve the material and spiritual conditions of the people's lives.

One of Meridian's major moments of intercession occurs when both Truman and Lynne have come to her for comfort after their daughter, Camara, is killed. This is a vexing section because of her personal history with each character, but it is also a crucial one for readers as ethical agents.³⁸ She has every reason to deny them care, but instead she listens to them and offers care. Meridian does not stir up a desire for bloodthirsty revenge; rather, she models a way to initiate healing by loving without controlling. Despite the ways this couple has hurt her

³⁸ The reader will remember that when Meridian is on her way to abort Truman's baby, she sees Truman and Lynne riding in the car together and laughing. She endures an abortion without anesthesia and is chastised by the doctor for her lack of morals. The doctor then offers to tie her tubes if she will have sex with him. After all this, Truman comes to Meridian as soon as Lynne is gone and tries to coax her into having his black babies (118-120). Still, in this later scene, Meridian is able to offer the couple forgiveness and comfort instead of righteous indignation or retaliation.

personally, she is able to recognize that her level of awakening is beyond theirs. Her identity is no longer tied up in another person. The narrative structure of this scene speaks to Walker's own psychological pain after her illegal abortion as a college student, for in this short chapter, Walker has Lynne and Meridian wax poetic about the dismal state of the country, pine nostalgically for their shared past, and then run into reminders of what has been lost. Through the first half of the chapter, Meridian is splitting her time between Lynne's shabby apartment and Truman's. Immense pain pervades the chapter. The untimely, violent death of their daughter breaks them apart and eventually brings them together but not as a couple. In a strange way, though Meridian's abortion caused her immense psychological and physical pain in addition to revictimization during the procedure, it has spared her the pain of losing a child to violence. Temporally, this scene occurs after Meridian has discovered that advocacy is her path to wellness.³⁹ She experiences a spiritual awakening that makes her ability to forgive supersede that of which Lynne is capable.

Spiritual awakening is a gradual process for Meridian, and her grappling with its influence on her ethos helps readers grasp the tenuous path of personal and political transformation. As mentioned earlier, Meridian seems to first encounter awakening in April of 1960 when she learns a house for civil rights workers near her own home has been bombed overnight. Walker says, "And so it was that one day in the middle of April in 1960 that Meridian Hill became aware of the past and present of the larger world" (70). Her world had become increasingly smaller before this moment, but in this instant, she becomes launched into a world of activism and advocacy. Her spiritual awakening is cemented later in the novel in a church.

³⁹ Deborah E. McDowell discusses Meridian's path to self-discovery in "The Self in Bloom." She argues Walker sets up a death/rebirth motif as evidenced by Meridian's change in physical well-being at the end of the novel, signaling her inner wellness and growth (263). In defying traditional roles, Meridian forges a new identity. S. Kanselvi also explores how Meridian's activism work advances her understanding of self and wellness (95).

Because of her mother's legalistic faith, the church has always been a fraught site for her; however, she attends a service because she is feeling lost after King's death. She is distraught at how materialistic people seem, but as the service continues, Meridian is drawn to the communal spirit through a conduit of rage (216).⁴⁰ She has felt lost as the perennial outsider, but this service is integral to her path to self-discovery. Meridian realizes that she has the most influential value to the Movement as an outsider.

When Meridian is able to accept her role as an outsider, she becomes healthier. During her Saxon days, Meridian felt a spiritual connection to the Sojourner tree. That connection is the reason she wanted the group to destroy the president's home rather than the tree during the Wild Child's funeral. It is as if part of her died when the tree was seemingly destroyed; however, at the end of the novel, readers learn that the Sojourner did not die after all. Anne-Marion sent her a photograph of the tree's miraculous tiny growth (239). The tree's renewal coincides with Meridian's spiritual growth. She has experienced healing because she was able to forgive herself. She is no longer bound by Anne-Marion and her mother's angry letters, and she does not need to burn them. She replaces these destructive voices with a restorative, poetic one. Instead of violence, she recognizes the possibility of a balm for herself and society. As she writes in one poem, "*there is water in the world for us / brought by our friends / though the rock of mother and god / vanishes into sand / and we, cast out alone / to heal / and re-create / ourselves*" (236). She traverses the path to self-discovery alone, but it allows her to connect to others.

Interdependence has taken on a new meaning for her. She does not need others for affirmation;

⁴⁰ Jones explores this scene through militancy or a "radical ethic of rage" (180). As she describes it, the term encompasses a black rage that will protect the living and not just mourn the dead. She quotes from Dave Dennis' eulogy of James Chaney to pose the question of the appropriate affective response to racism and injustice. The father speaking in the church during this scene in *Meridian* has lost his son to racial violence, and it is natural to think of Chaney during this scene. The injustice of the young man's death activates Meridian as an ethical agent and is the closest she comes to declaring the ability to kill for the Revolution. In this period of rage, she believes she is best equipped to clean up after the revolutionaries (*Meridian* 216).

rather, she needs others because love and advocacy give her life meaning, and she cannot accomplish those purposes separate unto herself.

Reading *Meridian* as a spiritual biography has the potential to build a common memory for diverse contemporary readers. With a new common memory, readers can live out the Beloved Community Dr. King envisioned more than 60 years ago:

The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men. (King, par. 5).

Still needed today, the Beloved Community is not one without conflict, but it is one where people labor toward transformative reconciliation. As Latasha Morrison points out in *Be the Bridge*, racial reconciliation happens first through lament, and part of the lamenting process is acknowledging false historical narratives. *Meridian* provides a different historical narrative of the Civil Rights Movement than one might find in a history textbook.⁴¹ This alternative narrative affords readers a view of the Movement that favors redemptive suffering, love, and community rather than violent divisiveness. The alternative narrative also paves a path of justice that is built on nonviolent ethical action. Instead of retributive violence, readers can invoke a feminist ethic of care in their own lives, bringing about restorative justice. As M. Jacqui Alexander, preeminent transnational feminist theorist, points out, restorative justice cannot be ethnocentric. People must commit to hearing, including, and working with others for personal and political transformation to take place. Only then can Walker's vision, inspired in part by King and other Civil Rights

⁴¹ In "Reading the Body: Alice Walker's *Meridian* and the Archeology of the Self," Adam Nadel argues that *Meridian* functions as an alternative, redemptive text, healing past fractures and rebuilding a new black tradition.

leaders, materialize, making it possible for people as transformed ethical agents to enact collective compassion and ultimately find their individual and collective voices.

CHAPTER THREE:

BRIDGING THE GAP OF INJUSTICE TOGETHER

In Chapter Two, I examine *Meridian* through a hermeneutical ethical lens according to Phelan's third ethical situation regarding implied author as well as through feminist ethics of care. In this final chapter, I build on the previous theoretical lenses by analyzing Toni Cade Bambara's narration in *Those Bones Are Not My Child* through feminist ethics of care and coalitional politics.

Atlanta Child Murders in Context

While *Those Bones* is a fictional account of the Atlanta Child Murders, there are other noteworthy nonfictional texts written about the murders. James Baldwin's lengthy essay, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, is considered a germinal work on the event even though he was living abroad during the time of the murders. His essay delves into the historical, economic, political, and social factors that allowed 29 children and adults to be murdered. His work is an indictment of the official narrative of the murders, but it is also a comprehensive examination of multiple factors that put victims at risk in the first place. As he writes in the Preface, readers generally try to escape the terror rather than confront it (xiii). His text forces readers to acknowledge the conditions, both specifically in Atlanta and generally in the United States, that led to the Atlanta murders.

In the foreword of *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, Derrick Bell and Janet Dewart Bell treat the text as a sort of prophecy about declining material conditions for those born black and poor in the United States (ix). They composed the foreword in 1994, yet their comments about

worsening conditions and dangerous race relations are still relevant in 2020. As do most others who write about the murders, they accuse Atlanta's authority figures of having wrong priorities that led to indifference regarding the rising number of missing and murdered children (viii). As Paul Mokrzycki Renfro also notes (46), the leaders in the city were more concerned about protecting its image than its children and ignored the factors that allowed such violence to persist. The Bells write, "For politicians, 'fear of crime' becomes both a readily translatable code for anti-black rhetoric and a convenient cover for the serious domestic issues that they prefer to ignore and for which they present no real solutions" (ix). They urge readers to recognize the ways in which society plays a role in exacerbating conditions that lead blacks, particularly young males, to incarceration or death, noting the Street Crime Act of 1994, which provided billions of dollars in new funding to prisons and new "categories of crime" to ensure those new prisons would fill (x). The Bells acknowledge the inevitable "what ifs" regarding this event: what if the murder victims were white children who lived in white neighborhoods? They suggest the situation would have been viewed as a crisis and the response would have been swift (xi). Their concluding summative comment about Baldwin's text affirms the heart of my project: "Baldwin's work cries out against the contradictions, the delusions—the manipulation of power—while he searches for that elusive love that would illuminate our moral obligation and, therefore, salvage our fragile civilization" (xii). Baldwin's text can help readers check their own place in a system that ignores the lost lives of young black children and adults, and Bambara's text accomplishes a similar function as it thrusts readers into the fictional world where Zala Spencer must work harder than any police investigator to bring her missing boy home. Reading *Those Bones* can activate people as ethical agents as they recognize their complicity in systems that perpetuate oppression and choose to enact justice rather than violence.

The Evidence of Things Not Seen is helpful in establishing a connection between history and contemporary racial tensions. In fact, Baldwin points out that while Atlanta is a hub of commerce, it is also in the state of Georgia, a southern state that has been fraught with racial violence and discrimination against blacks for centuries. Baldwin encourages an examination of Atlanta's history so as to prevent a reader from assuming that having a black mayor and black police commissioner meant that the city was truly "too busy to hate." Renfro also explores this examination of history in his essay, "The City Too Busy to Care: The Atlanta Youth Murders and the Southern Past, 1979-1981." His argument is that the southern past affected how people viewed the murders and ultimately affected Atlanta's reputation as a beacon of post-racial progress (44). Baldwin also describes intersectional oppressions that made the black, poor children susceptible to violent crime: "...for many a poor boy the most perceptible difference between the streets and home is that home is danger and squalor with a blanket and a roof" (8). As Baldwin argues, integration exacerbated intersectional oppressions.

Most black establishments, with the notable exception of the black church, deteriorated or went belly up as a result of integration (Baldwin 25). With the loss of these businesses, many black people went to work in menial jobs in businesses and hotels, thus becoming neo-slaves (26). Baldwin puts it starkly: "Blacks exist in the American imagination, and in relation to American institutions, in reference to the slave codes" (31). Baldwin notes that the economic inequity deepened the racial divide and that there are moral implications of the divide (29, 31) as well as forced geographical divides (32). Baldwin gives a succinct history of housing projects in the United States and concludes it is "White flight and not the Black arrival that alters, or demolishes, property values" (35).

Baldwin points the finger of blame, once again, at integration as having caused a larger economic disparity between blacks and whites (56-57). He notes that blacks had demanded desegregation, which demands basic treatment as humans (22).⁴² Importantly, Baldwin echoes both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. in believing that desegregation, rather than integration, and the accompanying recognition of blacks' humanity is essential to the nation's health, especially spiritual health (23). With this void of spiritual health, there is a void of morals, and as Baldwin claims, "The moral vacuum of any society immediately creates an actual social chaos" (41). All poor, black families in Atlanta were thrown into this chaos, and that did not suddenly happen in 1979. If anything, the killings called into question Atlanta's perceived exemption from Jim Crow violence. As Renfro notes, Atlanta was regarded as an exceptionalist city, but the killings made it impossible to ignore the racial divide and strife that had been brewing for decades (45). Renfro asserts, "The sordid affair transported African Americans back to a time of crushing uncertainty—of lynch mobs and sundown towns—and appeared to challenge the fundamental victories of the southern freedom struggle" (61). Officials had to diffuse the situation and placate those crying for justice.

To assuage those cries, officials arrested Wayne Bertram Williams in June 1981. He was twenty-three at the time. Authorities stopped him for driving over a bridge in the early morning hours when an officer allegedly heard a body thrown into the water. Although he was convicted of murdering only the last two victims—Jimmy Ray Payne and Nathaniel Cater—who were adults, he was believed to be responsible for the death or disappearance of all 29 victims. The case against Williams was thin, especially since Payne and Cater, as adults, did not fit the

⁴² Baldwin draws a distinction between integration and desegregation. He claims integration had already happened, or there would not be a variance in skin colors. He believes integration causes a racial division whereas desegregation would require the State and all its institutions to regard blacks as fully human not merely meld them into white institutions (*Evidence* 22-23).

infamous pattern of victims, but Williams was brought to trial because the FBI investigation was not yielding results and was in danger of being shut down.⁴³ Baldwin identifies a motive in Williams' arrest: "...the commercial viability of the city too busy (making money) to hate was in danger" (11), and he notes that the verdict made worse the city's racial tension, especially since most of the victims' mothers reject the verdict (13). Baldwin claims the inextricable link between Williams and the twenty-seven murders he was not arrested for or convicted of is due to the "emotional climate" in Atlanta and the power wielded by both the state of Georgia and the nation. Baldwin believes this link could not be made except in the Deep South (14).

The Black Caucus of the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) invoked a larger moral discussion with its majority members about the murders and Williams' speedy conviction. The Black Caucus' response is a good example of theory meeting praxis—of a research group involving advocacy groups to accomplish work for children. Slaughter-Defoe accounts for the caucus' appeal for an acknowledgement of complicity and subsequent ethical action: "...whether or not Wayne Williams was guilty, we are all party to the condition that occasioned the attacks upon vulnerable, impoverished Black children in Atlanta. Either we are part of the solution to such horrific conditions or we are enablers, party to the problem" (76). This statement makes every reader accountable to action because silence or inaction is nothing less than complicity.

The victims' parents committed to action, and Baldwin devotes critical attention to Camille Bell whose nine-year-old son, Yusef Ali Bell, was the fourth murder victim. She started

⁴³ Camille Bell and many of the other victims' parents rejected Williams' conviction. In a sound byte on the Atlanta Monster podcast, Ms. Bell voices discontent about the verdict: "If I believe that Wayne Williams killed the other 12 that they claim, the same fibers that were found on those bodies were also found on Yusef's body, then I must believe that Wayne Williams killed my son. But since I don't believe that Wayne Williams killed anybody, I can't believe that Wayne Williams, therefore, killed my son. What it all boils down to is now we have Wayne Williams, 23, the 30th victim of the Atlanta slayings" (Episode 3, 38:39).

the Stop the Murders Mothers Committee (STOP). She perceived the severity of the situation before authorities were willing to admit it. She did not see a pattern of runaway or missing children and consider it innocuous but rather a threat to the lives of all black children in Atlanta (48-49). In his recounting of a conversation with Ms. Bell, Baldwin conveys her concern about authorities' indifference to the victims, and he notes that Ms. Bell attributes that indifference to the victims' socioeconomic status (54). Renfro acknowledges this same sentiment as he quotes Rev. Ralph David Abernathy's sermon in February 1981, condemning the treatment of the missing and murdered children as throwaway children. Abernathy attributed that indifference to the evils of racism (Renfro 56). Eric Gary Anderson, through an ecosocial lens, also links the murders to indifference toward this particular place, this particular population (196). Furthermore, Rebecca Wanzo acknowledges that the media did not seriously cover the story because black terror was not perceived as American terror (247).⁴⁴

The way in which Ms. Bell was treated is proof of the murders' related economic effects. She had taken the hard stance that the victims' parents' committee should be the only ones authorized to collect funds for the parents, and retaliation was swift: the Governor's Office of Consumer Affairs threatened prosecution for fund solicitors (57-58). It is telling that it is an office related to commerce that threatens the committee's work, for their work threatened to expose Atlanta to national scorn, thereby threatening the city's economic stability. Baldwin bluntly points the motive of bringing in the FBI as "stifling an incipient scandal in order to protect the magic of the marketplace" (60-61). Such a motive still speaks to authorities'

⁴⁴ Wanzo elaborates this point by saying, "Murdered black bodies lack scope because they do not translate as harms that could affect the majority of U.S. citizens" (247). Wanzo uses the phrase "communal terror." Since this communal terror did not immediately touch the majority of white citizens in Atlanta or elsewhere in the U.S., the murders were largely ignored. This domestic terrorism against black citizens was subordinated to international terrorism, particularly in Iran.

indifference to the loss of young, poor black lives (to whom Baldwin aptly refers as “strangers to safety” (62).

The SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) coordinated with STOP, and they functioned as a coalition: they committed to raising consciousness, collecting donations, organizing marches, petitioning the government, and patrolling the neighborhoods to protect children (Renfro 54-55). While their collective efforts accomplished tangible work, Renfro notes another result: “Their campaign revealed the city’s existing racial, economic, and community fault lines and cast aspersions on Atlanta’s biracial power structure” (55). These groups forced a new narrative about racial terror that the official narrative was ignoring.

Narrative Ethics in *Those Bones*

During the time of the murders, Bambara was embedded in coalition in Atlanta,⁴⁵ which is why it is natural to read this novel through a coalitional politics lens. She had firsthand experience with the terror, living and working in neighborhoods affected by the crimes. As opposed to James Baldwin, who as an outsider felt ill-equipped to write about the murders, Malaika Adero argues, “Bambara, however, was well positioned to write this story because of the way she embedded herself into all the communities in which she lived” (238). She says further, “Bambara’s *Those Bones* is more confident in its message [than Baldwin’s *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*], because its author was intimate with the subject and experientially linked to its plight” (239). Because of her close connection to the subject, it is difficult to separate

⁴⁵ Malaika Adero notes in “Toni Cade Bambara to the Bone” that Bambara was a “good neighbor, activist, writer, and cultural worker,” and those roles equipped her to be involved in coalitional work as the black community responded to the child murders (237). Adero met Bambara at a writer’s conference at Clark College in Atlanta, and it was during that conference presentation that Bambara helped Adero come to a new understanding of what it means to be a revolutionary. People may have disparate roles such as poet or activist, but Bambara says, “Our first responsibility is to our people” (qtd. in Adero 242). The revolutionary cares for people, especially those in their families that paved the way for them to succeed. She also worked with Bambara in the Pamoja Writers Guild (which Bambara refers to as Pomoja Writer’s Group in the novel’s Acknowledgements), which was a writing support group that met monthly in Bambara’s home for more than six years.

Bambara from the novel as flesh-and-blood author, and the influence is also pervasive through its narration and characterization. As the Prologue and Epilogue reveal, the missing child could have easily been Karma, Bambara's daughter. This fact introduces an interesting perspective on narration: since the novel uses third person omniscient narration, the reader is privy to Zala and other characters' thoughts.⁴⁶ This raises the question of reliability and the ethical position from which the story is told.

In *Living to Tell about It*, James Phelan discusses narrators' three main roles—reporting, interpreting, and evaluating—and how unreliability occurs when narrators deviate from those roles. Phelan calls this deviation the “metaphor of axes of unreliability” and identifies how each affects the text. He claims unreliable reporting shows up in a text through treatment of characters, facts, and events. He places unreliable interpreting on the axis of knowledge and perception. Finally, he argues unreliable evaluating is on the axis of ethics and evaluation (50). Claiming that the narration is unreliable does not mean the authorial audience completely rejects the account they are given; rather, readers supplement the narrator's account (50-51). Their supplementation is in itself a hermeneutical act as they weigh the narrator's reporting, interpreting, and evaluating to determine their own readings. The ethics of the told, related to narration, in *Those Bones* involves the reader questioning preeminent narratives about absentee black parents or black street thug sons. This questioning engages the reader in hermeneutical narrative ethics as they read, interpret the narrator's deviations, and determine an appropriate

⁴⁶ While the novel employs third person narration, the Prologue and Epilogue use second person. Kelley Wagers notes the use of second-person pronouns draws readers into the story. Readers are to experience the terror of not knowing where their child is, and that terror frames the reading of the novel. The narrative construction is an intentional choice with ethical implications. From the beginning the reader is challenged to not be silent. The ominous question, “Will you find your voice in time?” seems directed squarely at readers (Bambara 21).

ethical response. Before exploring possible ethical responses, the remainder of this section will analyze *Those Bones* along Phelan's three axes of narration.

Through one fictional family, *Those Bones* puts a human face on the terror and racialized violence black families experienced during the Atlanta Child Murders, and the story is mediated primarily through Zala's anguish and anger. From the outset, Bambara's narrator uses the reporting role to create sympathy for Zala and, by extension, all the mothers whose children had gone missing or been found murdered in Atlanta. The story's plot reveals details about Sonny's disappearance, yet Bambara's narrator also weaves true events and facts about the Atlanta Murders into the story. In the novel's acknowledgements, Bambara is clear about how she believes a story about true events should be written: "Assemble a cast in line with the actual events," and "DON'T: treat real people as though they were fictional" (672). She is setting her narrator's ground rules, which helps the reader digest the story's characters, events, and facts, determining when to supplement the narrator's account.

Early in the novel, readers gain insight into Zala's character by the way she responds to Sonny's disappearance. When Zala initially goes to the police station after Sonny has gone missing, she knows she must counter the "neglectful mother" script the police will write on her. This scene is important for two reasons: first, through the narration and dialogue, readers sense that the police are doing inadequate work to investigate the murders. Secondly, the scene establishes Zala's distress: "Lying out cold on the floor, she could infect them enough with her desperation to get them mobilized. And maybe God, seeing how things were, pierced through as she was with hot spikes of self-disgust, would take pity and send Sonny home unharmed" (71). Readers encounter this heartbreaking scene through the narrator's reporting of Zala's thoughts and words.

During a later scene, readers encounter Zala's first interaction with the Metropolitan Atlanta Emergency Task Force to Investigate Missing and Murdered Children. The narrator reveals Zala's strategy, but the scene also functions to expose the Task Force's foibles. Zala brings a variety of items she believes will help them track Sonny down: medical records, a food wrapper, a pick comb with his hair on it. In Zala's mind, she had provided enough material for police dogs to track down her son wherever he is in the city; however, Zala's expectations exceed the Task Force's resources and motivation. When she returns to the Task Force the following day, she learns her efforts to provide them with material they will need to find Sonny are worthless, for no one can even find Sonny's file. At this point, Zala changes her strategy to appealing to pathos instead. On her own, she continues to piece together details she interprets as clues. Importantly, Zala gathers information about suspicious cars, and through this narratorial reporting, Bambara includes names of victims who are not on the Task Force's official list but who are on Chet Dettlinger's list. This is an intentional narrative ethics decision to cast a wider net than the Task Force has. Through this inclusion, readers are meant to question the reliability of the Task Force's list and investigation.

In such a painful story about even more tragic events, it is not surprising that the main characters experience extreme mental distress. Readers see the toll Sonny's disappearance and the investigation take on Spence and Zala in particular. Both are wrought with shame and experience physical ailments. Spence has PTSD from his service during the Vietnam War, and the stress of Sonny's disappearance exacerbates the condition. He has isolated himself from black organizations that could offer help and solidarity (116), and he is declining mentally (145). Likewise, Zala is numb and neglectful of Kenti and Kofi (241-44). The anguish of not knowing whether Sonny is dead or alive paralyzes her and makes her irrational. She is so consumed with

searching for Sonny that she is unable to care for her other children (327). She is so unwell she has to be taken to the hospital after she takes a lie detector test (189). Readers learn about Spence and Zala's mental states through the omniscient narrator's reporting, and as they get more desperate to find Sonny, the narrator's interpreting role deepens readers' perception about Sonny's disappearance as well as the larger investigation.

Most glaring in the narrator's interpreting role is how Zala's perception is conveyed. Like many of the mothers whose children went missing, she blamed herself for Sonny's disappearance. The narrator relays her internal dialogue and provides commentary on her self-blame too: "*I should have gotten on the case the minute Kofi said 'Went.'* She damned herself. She'd gotten the cue and not done as she should. Her son's trail was growing cold" (94). She believes she has missed a cry for help (109, 217), so she blames herself. In their interpreting role, the narrator is setting up an ethical response for readers whereby they can believe Zala is complicit in her son's disappearance, or readers can challenge the tenuous situation's reliability and not perpetuate a cycle of victim blaming. The act of perceiving Zala as a victim is an ethical choice, for it requires readers to acknowledge the interlocking systems of oppression at work in her life that victimize her.

Bambara's novel seeks to expose the way in which poor, black families have become normalized as victims. As Rebecca Wanzo argues in "Terror at Home: Naturalized Victimization in *Those Bones Are Not My Child*," the novel navigates five narratives that shed light on the Atlanta Child Murders.⁴⁷ In commenting on how those narratives are at work in the novel, Wanzo notes how intersectionality affects victimization and justice in these cases: "The Spencers

⁴⁷ Wanzo describes the five narratives as "the psychological toll on the family, media coverage, state response to the tragedy, black community mobilization, and larger national and international issues converging at the dawn of Ronald Reagan's presidency" (245).

illustrate the difficulties of having claims responded to when citizens possess outsider status as citizens making claims on the state” (246). Police officers denigrated and victimized the fictional Spencers as well as real families as racial and socioeconomic outsiders. When police officers first come to the Spencer’s home, the white police officer is overtly racist. He asks questions about the children’s fathers, implying they do not all have the same father (42). They are living in inner city Atlanta, yet the white officer asks if Sonny went for a swim (43), whether Zala is renting or owns their home (47), rudely questions why there is no man of the home (50), shakes Sonny’s school folder to see if drugs would come out (50), and finally suggests that Sonny, who is twelve, might have gone to strip club or adult bookstore. Through these dialogic exchanges, the narrator is showing how the police are rewriting the script, ignoring what is actually happening, and implying Sonny is a runaway rather than a missing child. Readers have the responsibility to reject the police’s perception and acknowledge the inappropriate response to the tragedy.

The notions of runaway and throwaway children are central to the state’s lack of response to the Atlanta Child Murders. While “runaway” has historically implied leaving an oppressor to pursue freedom for African Americans, Bambara notes how the term has taken on new meaning during this tragedy: “How soured ‘runaway’ had become of late in the mouths of strangers who would not budge from swivel chairs and air-conditioned offices” (104). Dubbing the missing children as runaways was a state strategy to lessen the scope and magnitude of the crimes. Bambara resents that strategy and uses her narrator’s interpreter role to cast doubt on the cases’ victimology. In *Those Bones*, Zala insists Sonny did not run away, and she does not believe all of the other victims were runaways too. Zala commits to her own investigation, and her findings color the way readers perceive the Task Force’s work, but it is as if Bambara knows that cannot

be a seamless endeavor. The work affects Zala's mental state, which deepens readers' responsibility in determining if her account can be trusted. Hermeneutically, readers decide which knowledge to accept as true and which perceptions are most valid.

Bambara's narrative strategy is to expose the injustice and suffering real families experienced through Zala's fictional experience, and as mentioned, that strategy entangles readers in a web of Zala's declining mental state. Bambara describes the walls as closing in on the Spencers (122). The terror, shame, and blame consume Zala and interrupt her everyday tasks: "In the middle of a sentence, in the middle of the street, it attacked without warning, without mercy. She'd double over gasping for air until someone ran up behind her, lifting, knuckles pressed into her diaphragm trying to help her dislodge the bone stuck in her life" (123). As readers perceive the widening divide between Zala and others, Zala's decline is undeniable. Indeed, Bambara calls Zala's life "uninhabitable" (127). Intensely focused on finding Sonny, Zala is living within her own mind and is not able to tend to her family the way she did prior to Sonny's disappearance (212). Readers see the way in which Zala feels empty yet weighed down (228). If she is out of touch with reality, as we see in the scene with Leah's tapes (333), can readers trust her perception more than that of trained police officers? This is an important moment for readers to recall that Phelan's definition of unreliability does not involve a flat rejection of the narrator's account but can involve the reader proffering a supplemental account that acknowledges the vast historical, racial, and economic narratives that affect the text and arrives at a place where the outsider is to be believed.

The axis of ethics and evaluation in narration provide the reader with rich opportunities to read the text from a hermeneutical lens that favors the outsider's perspective. In particular, there are several instances where Bambara's narrator invites readers to confront their acceptance of the

dominant narrative. The dominant narrative wants people to believe the 29 names on the Task Force's list were the only victims during the Atlanta Child Murders and that the daycare explosion in Bowen Homes was caused by a faulty boiler. Additionally, the dominant narrative wants to pin all the murders on Wayne Williams so that Atlanta can continue to advertise itself as "The City Too Busy to Hate," keeping the convention dollars rolling in. Instead of seeing a black mayor and police commissioner and thus believing Atlanta is a post-racial city, readers have a responsibility to at least question if not outright reject the dominant narrative. The narrator can report facts and details about events and interpret knowledge and perceptions, but the evaluating role gets at the heart of hermeneutical narrative ethics as readers dispel false narratives.

One scene in which the narrator's evaluating role is evident is when Zala follows a group of Sonny's friends and waits for them to come out of a Church's Chicken restaurant. When they exit, Bestor Brooks asks Zala if she wants to see him about something, and all she answers is "Sonny," for she believes that suffices. The scene is visceral in its power struggle: "She watched him studying her, her hair uncombed, forehead furrowed, eyes bloodshot, the mouth hard drawn. She'd never felt uglier" (159). She feels ashamed for following them and waiting to pounce on them, but she is also desperate to find Sonny. The text notes that they pity her and feel embarrassed for her. They can look at her and know she is not well; however, the narration shifts from dialogue to a description of the kinds of sociological evils to which these boys are subject. This list runs the gamut from intentional evildoers to poverty, so it is useful to quote at length to grasp the sociological evaluation the narrator is setting up:

Was she all right, a boy was asking, a boy menaced by creeps who cruised young boys, by drug dealers who used them dangerously, by numbers dealers who exploited their

mobility and quick memory, by larceny-minded adults who had them climbing in windows or thieving from coat racks, going in men's rooms to roll homosexuals, menaced by Saturday-night juiceheads, by dogs, rats, reckless drivers, and don't-give-a-shit landlords, by leaky gas pipes and space heaters that fell over and sent curtains up, sleeping on roofs in summer with no retainer walls, crummy jobs or no jobs at all to prepare for, join the army and see the world from a body bag, student loans that kept you in debt past thirty, weirdo mothers of lost friends who stalked them, and maniacs on the loose grabbing and killing, and was she all right? (161-62).

In this scene, the narrator presents wide-ranging, intersectional obstacles erected to keep these poor, black boys down and reveals the ethics of the cases preceding but also extends beyond the murders themselves. In doing so, the narrator exposes cracks and systemic evils that have festered since Reconstruction.

The narrator's evaluator role is also evident in the scene after Wayne Williams is arrested. This moment in the text opens a space for the narrator to question the dominant narrative and thus infuse the text with an ethical evaluation. In the opening of the section entitled "Bee Pollen and Oil of Evening Primrose," the narrator documents a conversation between Zala, Mattie, and Paulette, as they are debating whether or not their actions forced the police to arrest someone, or rather anyone. Mattie flatly asks Zala, "Who could know our disclosures would force the authorities to act? And we don't know for certain that they did arrest someone simply because of our mailings" (497). If readers were unfamiliar with the real cases, they might be confused about why the women were not ecstatic an alleged perpetrator was arrested; however, Bambara's audience is likely aware of the controversy surrounding the investigation and Wayne Williams' arrest. Bambara's audience would also be likely to reject the dominant narrative the

FBI, GBI, and APD wants citizens to accept—that Wayne Williams was responsible for all the murders, and his arrest means the terror is over.

Through the women’s conversation, the narrator casts doubt on the integrity of the investigation, which opens the evaluation axis as readers determine the reliability of the ethical message they are presented with in this scene. The women are poring over Zala’s collection of notes when Mattie declares that she does not believe Wayne Williams fits the description of any of the suspects (498). The trio is examining the newspaper’s spin on the arrest, and Bambara’s narrator is hard at work in this section, describing inconsistencies in the dubious newspaper story. Using both broad strokes (like biographical details that contradict one another) and fine details (like the news reporting that he had access to a police scanner but not that he worked as a free-lance reporter), Bambara’s narrator is leading readers to question the official narrative and further question why *they* would buy into an official narrative that simply does not add up. The narrator gets at the heart of the issue that pervades the five narratives Wanzo discusses and is one readers cannot ignore when engaging in a hermeneutical ethical reading: “[Local newscasters] preferred to quote the GBI and FBI agents and FBI director William Webster, everyone except the Black woman on the PBS channel, as they gleefully announced, teeth glistening, eyes shining, that it was a Black man after all and not a racist conspiracy” (502). If a black man committed all the murders, then they were not racially motivated, and there is no space for racial retributive violence. Williams’ arrest saves Commissioner Brown from having to disclose the Task Force’s list (509) and allows Atlanta to not have to reprint those Chamber of Commerce pamphlets for “The City Too Busy to Hate.”

Bambara calls living in Atlanta as a black and poor person during this time a “state of siege” (521). Zala’s child is missing, and all around her other missing children are being found

murdered. While it is true fear and shame cloud her perception of reality, another thing is true that endears her to readers and makes them willing to stand by her account. She subscribes to the precept that there is no such thing as other people's children. She is outraged that people are shirking their responsibilities, allowing children to be abducted and murdered. Her outrage then activates her as an ethical agent: "A voice in the back of her head told her it was up to her: *You the one*" (154). She attempts to silence the voice, acknowledging that other people are trained to do investigative work; however, she realizes it is up to her to work with others to find answers and bring black children home alive.

We the One: Coalitional Politics in *Those Bones*

In this penultimate section, I discuss two groups who work as coalitions in *Those Bones*. Bambara makes the case for coalitional politics early in the novel's Prologue: "Everyone would have dropped everything to find a missing child, for when mumps have been replaced with murder, alarm is no longer a private affair" (9). With alarm now a public affair, parents in affected neighborhoods bound together to fight the phantom killer(s). The baseball bat crew is a famous, or perhaps infamous, example. A crew of men would patrol the Techwood development nightly to deter the child murderer from targeting one of their children. The novel makes it clear that poor, black parents were willing to go to desperate lengths to protect their children and free them from the threat of violence. As Audre Lorde says, "Without community, there is no liberation" (112), and the parents and children in these Atlanta neighborhoods were yearning to be liberated from physical and systemic violence.

The first coalitional group I discuss is the Stop the Violence mothers' group, known as STOP. An important characteristic of coalitional politics is that the work is done across lines of difference. Cole and Luna articulate this characteristic in their definition of coalitional politics:

“The process through which groups that define themselves as different work together politically, either long or short term, in the service of some mutually valued end” (71). While the STOP members may seem homogenous, they are defined as different because of mode. Some of their children were still considered missing, while others had been found dead. Some of their children had been strangled, while others were victims of sexual assault before being murdered. Furthermore, even though they were the majority, STOP was not exclusively made up of black mothers. Regardless of these differences, they are committed to working together until the murders stop.

Acknowledging multiple identities is another important characteristic of coalitional politics. Zala is a brilliant example of someone who embodies multiple identities. She is poor, black, a mother of three, an artist, estranged from her husband because of his severe PTSD, and a student. If pressed, readers could likely place her in additional identity categories. With her multiple identities, Zala joins other mothers who also embody multiple identities, but she feels uncomfortable joining them: “Zala hated going to STOP, but hated not going. She didn’t want to be disconnected from people who felt as she felt” (319). As is typical with coalitional work, these parents had to traverse lines of difference and face discomfort to forge connections and work to find answers about their missing and murdered children. Coalitional politics scholars would argue that difference enhances the opportunities for connection. Identity in coalitions does not lump people together into singular identity markers as an identity-based group might because so much critical work is done across lines of difference (Ackelsberg 90). In fact, the Task Force created false universals, as Lorde would say (117), for them to not acknowledge STOP’s intragroup differences.

To avoid romanticizing coalitional politics, risks involved in coalitional work must be acknowledged. Carasthesis says, “Identity-based groups are spaces of similarity, seclusion, and safety; whereas coalitions are spaces of difference, confrontation, and risk” (944). These STOP mothers had everything to lose. The way Rebecca Wanzo describes their goal sounds so simple: convince people that these murders were matters of civil and human rights (248). However, both history and the novel prove the uphill battle these parents faced in attempting to accomplish that goal. The space was anything but safe for the parents, for they felt responsible for the enormous task of bringing home their missing children or bringing their murdered children’s killer(s) to justice. They felt pressured to do investigative work and oppose the official narrative to fight for justice, yet they knew their opposition to APD, the GBI, and the FBI could set back their progress if those agencies were so annoyed with STOP’s efforts that they would suspend their own investigations.

At least in this context, cost can be treated separately from risk. As mentioned, the parents risked police attention by conducting their own investigations, but being a part of STOP also came with a cost.⁴⁸ Parents like Zala and Spence had to sacrifice individual concern for their child to contribute to the group’s shared action. This is a difficult part of coalitional work, for it requires people to lay aside their personal agendas and trust that the progress the group makes will benefit them individually. Barvosa-Carter describes this aspect of coalitional politics as synergism as members work for both self and the group (118). Most painfully, STOP parents had to trust the work would benefit all even after their own child was confirmed to be deceased. Lugones says coalitional members must “compromise and relinquish insularity” (76). Doing so

⁴⁸ Carole Anne Taylor does not use the word “coalition,” but her description of the characters’ actions makes the case for it: “Bambara’s characters themselves do not represent disconnections between institutional power and its effects, but rather the sustained, ongoing effort, at great personal cost, of forging connections disallowed by state and institutional power” (273).

helps the group weather internal tensions that are bound to arise during such high-stakes, highly emotional work.

The second significant coalitional group in *Those Bones* is the smaller group Zala and Spence form with Delia, Dave, Mattie, Paulette, and some of Spence's vet friends. This group works together to account for cover-ups, and one of their primary concerns is witnesses' safety. The coalitional group is effective because while it can boast multiplicity, it is also smaller and thus more contained than STOP. From this groups' efforts, readers sense the immense amount of grassroots efforts that have to be taken in coalitional work. Cries of help have been ignored (394), and the Task Force seems to be stealing money from envelopes being sent to STOP (393). This group commits to doing the investigative work the Task Force should be doing even though they do not have the resources. Carole Anne Taylor discusses this disparity, bringing the Task Force's list into contention by arguing it is constructed by closely guarded sources, like databases inaccessible to anyone outside the Task Force's auspices; therefore, parents had to make their own archive based on what they collect themselves (266).⁴⁹ The sheer magnitude of the work before them makes some members of the group want to partner with Roy Innis and CORE, yet their efficacy is drawn from their ability to work clandestinely in small teams.

Judge Webber's wife, Ivy, aids the group, which is a fascinating part of the plot. Her husband is a prominent judge, yet Mrs. Webber grants the small group a space in the carriage house on their property to collaborate and conduct their independent investigation. Mrs. Webber is prompted to aid the coalition because of an internal tension between "duty to others versus

⁴⁹ Taylor further notes the effect the personal archival process had on the parents' personal lives. She emphasizes the communal creation of the information and notes why it must be communally created and maintained because it is too much for one person to bear (268). She identifies another important function of the archive: "This archive spurs a relational watching, as though with necessary consensus, as any vestiges of global memory necessarily give way to undifferentiated, 'decentered microhistories'" (269). The parents live with the knowledge that denial is the most likely official response to their investigative efforts, so they never resign themselves to the mentality that erasures and abductions will pass. They bear the burden to collect information and expose their findings.

duty to home” (402). She is torn because she believes contributing money or marching does not suffice. She feels the weight of responsibility to act because she is in a position to do so. As such, she is a good model for readers who also must weigh their ethical obligation when equipped to act. While Mrs. Webber is black, she is different than the group in most other aspects concerning identity, especially regarding socioeconomic status, yet by helping this group, she is joining their coalition and working across lines of difference.

The smaller parents’ group had to work within a liminal space, as Lugones points out is characteristic of coalitional politics (84). They also had to embrace fluidity. To be effective, they had to adapt their lists and methods based on new MOs, police officers, and killer profiles. They watched videos to bolster their motivation and focus their search for clues. The videos serve a narrative purpose as well, for Bambara’s narrator opens space for readers to respond as narratives play to dangerous stereotypes regarding black teen pregnancy and welfare.⁵⁰ Additionally, the group had to work through disagreements about methods, theories, and interpretation of clues.⁵¹ One such example is when Vernon and Lafayette disagree about authorities’ role in perpetuating the crimes. Lafayette does not believe anyone would intentionally want the murders to go unsolved and the victim list to grow; however, Vernon counters by saying, “People keep interpreting phenomena in terms of their own careers” (455). Essentially, the group has to stick together through external threats and internal disagreements. One of the most famous quotations about coalitional politics is that the work requires people to work with others who could kill them but that people trust they will not (Reagon 351). The work

⁵⁰ One of the videos the group watches is an interview where a white woman discloses that she believes black babies born to parents who receive Welfare should be separated at birth and raised in special boarding schools to help them become productive members of society and not become criminals or Welfare recipients (411).

⁵¹ Both Barvosa-Carter and Carastathis speak to the need for coalitional groups to work through disagreements by acknowledging identity. Barvosa-Carter argues for multiplicity, saying that tensions can be reduced if members can alter their positionality in the group (119). Carastathis emphasizes wholeness of self as a way to embrace what has been “derided, denied, or diminished” (957).

both these parents and the parents in STOP were doing was essential because engaging in the work might cost one of the parents their life, but not engaging in the work would most certainly result in more children losing their lives.

Cole says coalitions are formed through “shared marginalization in relation to power” (447). This is unfortunately an accurate description of how the coalitions were formed in *Those Bones*. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, poor, black parents in Atlanta were subject to multiple oppressions. They had to work together across lines of difference to advocate for their individual children as well as their larger communities. Bambara seems to argue for an organizational strategy that does not react to authorities’ agendas but produces an alternative way to think and act for justice (651). The focus is less on the sources of official power but on the marginalized, their needs, and how they work to meet them. Authorities know coalitions threaten to expose inequities and systematic oppressions, and it is in the authorities’ interest to keep them quiet and disorganized.⁵² If readers glean anything from a coalitional politics reading, it is that *we* the one. The onus is on collective readers to forge connections with people who are different and advocate for justice. Coalitions prevent dangerous isolation found in groups shrouded in secrecy, like the Seven Days Men.

Standing Together to Bridge the Gap of Injustice

A scene toward the end of the novel, when masses gather for a petition⁵³ rally at a church, presents an important moment for a merging of the three theoretical lens I use in this project—hermeneutical narrative ethics, feminist ethics of care, and coalitional politics. Before Zala

⁵² In *Those Bones*, Spence distributes to members of the smaller coalitional group National Security Council Memo number 46, dated March 17, 1978. He tells the group the authorities who sent and received the memo want to isolate Americans of African descent: “They speak to our situation—namely, to the isolation and muzzling of the community voice” (392).

⁵³ The purpose of the gathering was to collect signatures on a petition for the parents to take to William French Smith, United States Attorney General, demanding he reopen the case. They were seeking a congressional investigation led by the Black Caucus that would involve the parents in the investigation.

addresses the crowd, Reverend Thomas issues a call for courage. His imploration to the large crowd is powerful: “Let us pray for the strength to become more accountable to the generations to come. And for the strength to make this city responsible to people’s need for the truth, so that our children will not grow up cynical and warped by our failure of courage” (657). Readers, too, cannot escape the call to accountability and courage, and when Zala fills the pulpit, readers can neither escape her indictment against apathy nor the solidarity she invites. Opening her speech with Gwendolyn Brooks’ words, Zala immediately makes the case for ethical obligation: “We are all each other’s harvest, we are each other’s business” (658). Zala’s message is visceral because she feels as if she has failed herself, her son, and her community. She admits that she was in denial when children started going missing, and then she believes she was too quiet once her own son was found alive. She calls out ways in which poor, black people have been lied to and silenced, particularly during this terror in Atlanta. In a powerful way, her speech is also a confession and plea for reconciliation. Once Sonny returned, her accountability to STOP waned, and she recognizes that as a member of that coalition, her actions were wrong. She ignored the ethical responsibility she had to continue following leads she and others unearthed. She denied her ethical responsibility to speak the truth, and she wants to make things right between herself, Sonny, and her community.

While Zala is confessing her own wrongdoing, she is holding a mirror to the congregation and readers by extension. A powerful, alliterative line cuts to the heart, “We swallow the line that security means secrecy and silence” (660). To avoid being called names and risk repudiation, adults stay silent, and children go missing or are murdered. Zala pits allegiance to state against allegiance to their children, and the winner of that dichotomy, whether in Atlanta or our own cities, should always be the children. When the interests of the state trump

the interests of the people, hegemony is reinscribed and the most vulnerable are further oppressed. Zala ends her remarks by reminding the congregation that “coerced silence is terrorism” (661). If people yield to authorities rather than standing together to bridge the gap of injustice, powers that be can continue to terrorize the powerless.⁵⁴

While coerced silence is terrorism, coerced confession is too. There is danger in prescribing how someone else should respond to violence, especially if they have been the victim of a crime. Zala has attempted to guilt Sonny into talking about what happened to him by telling him other boys’ and girls’ lives may be at stake because of his silence. At the end of her speech, she says, “Maybe they feel why should they tell everything when nobody else does. And what right do we have to badger them when we don’t demand answers from the people we pay to run this city? What they’re hiding has tremendous importance for the well-being of hundreds of thousands. Doesn’t it?” (661). When Zala delivers these powerful rhetorical questions, she looks to the back of the congregation and sees Sonny nod in agreement. They have finally reached mutual understanding.

This scene is a significant one from a feminist ethics of care perspective. In the previous chapter, I discuss Carol Gilligan’s concept of voice and its relation to a feminist ethic of care. I note people’s need to speak and be responded to and the suffering that ensues when people feel isolated because of a lack of an outlet for their voice to be heard. When Sonny is found in Miami, he is silent. Zala needs him to speak and assuage her worst fears about what he has gone through, but he cannot offer her that consolation. Conversely, Spence does not want to force Sonny into talking before he is ready because he believes that will merely cause Sonny to lie

⁵⁴ In “Toni’s Obligation,” Cheryl A. Wall refers to *Those Bones* as a documentary novel, noting that it captures a “Second Reconstruction” whereby terror is the methodology to “reimpose racial hierarchies” that were supposed to be obsolete with the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement (37-38).

(528). Upon their return to Atlanta, the Spencers attend the community fair, and Sonny's costume is unique—he is dressed as “the Prophet.” Note the definite article; it is as Sonny is *the* one to be the mouthpiece for this experience, yet he does not want to talk.

Through a series of tragic conversations with Zala, Sonny reveals that he has always questioned whether or not he was wanted (579). This section in the text palpably displays the discrepancy between what is said and what is thought. The narrator describes vivid, disturbing recollections between the short sentences Sonny actually vocalizes. One of the most painful parts of this section is observing the way Zala tries to tell the story for Sonny in an inaccurate way but one that is easier for her to swallow. She is saying what she needs to be true, not what is true. Sonny suffers in isolation, mentally reliving his trauma over and over again, because he cannot voice his truth. What he has experienced is so painful that Zala feels as if she has to re-write it, but changing the narrative does not change what Sonny lived through. Eventually, Zala has silenced Sonny to one-word, compliant responses, which exacerbates his shame and self-blame and widens the gulf between them. Sonny's refusal to speak to authorities and expose those responsible for his trauma is a reminder that people cannot speak *for* others.

Sonny's silence can also be interpreted as a political act against violence and victim blaming. Kelley Wagers writes about testimony as a response to violence in “Telling Run Away: Novel Testimony in Toni Cade Bambara's *Those Bones Are Not My Child*.” Her article explores the relationship between testimony and silence, including the ethics involved in asking victims of violence to testify. While Wagers claims “testimony [is] a response to historical trauma,” she also notes that there is more than one way to testify, including being silent. Wagers argues that in not speaking, Sonny “demands the recognition of his singular identity” (225). He neither wants

to stand in for other missing or murdered children nor to become a symbol for STOP.⁵⁵ The Spencers think the cure to Sonny's grief should be collective because they have worked so hard to expose the larger injustice than just their son's experience, but that alienates him from his family and increases the pain he feels when the consistent message he perceives is that his singular experience only matters if he can be useful to the larger story. The silence versus speaking dilemma is important from both narrative ethics and feminist ethics of care perspectives. If testimony is both individual and collective, the burden to tell does not rest on the victim alone. Those who bear witness to testimony have an obligation to act because indifference compounds the victim's grief. In explaining the importance of agency and living through testimony, Wagers offers an important objective for society as a whole: "A further goal in the context of racial injury is to awaken present witnesses to the ongoing violence of everyday life and arrest its powerful reiteration" (229). This project is devoted to creating a common memory as an alternative to retributive racial violence, and fighting indifference toward racialized violence is one step.

Those Bones is referred to as Barbara's magnum opus (Boyd L3). She labored over the monstrous 1,800 page manuscript for twelve years before her untimely death, but her efforts pay off. The work challenges readers on multiple fronts to enter the text as ethical agents concerned about care and respond to racialized violence and injustice. Cheryl A. Wall phrases it well: "The moral of this complex novel is simple. Taking action, moving against injustice whenever and wherever it is met is the most and least one can do" (40). As seen in this chapter, the parents provide a model for how to take action as a coalition, and it is possible for readers to do the

⁵⁵ Wagers also echoes others regarding the disturbing indifference shown to victims and their families, yet she links a repercussion others do not. The trouble with forcing speech is that the subjects may not be valued, furthering victimizing them if they have the courage to testify and are met with indifference (225).

same. Rebecca Wanzo hints at hermeneutical narrative ethics with coalitional possibilities when referencing readers' acknowledgement of Zala's testimony. Readers cannot rest in the comfort of their local conditions or breathe sighs of relief when violence and domestic terror do not touch their lives, for we are all linked and belong to one another (253). *Those Bones* serves as a wake-up call to readers who get overwhelmed or, like Meridian Hill, even paralyzed by the magnitude of racialized violence in the United States. We cannot become fatigued in the fight for justice or accept that retributive violence is the only answer.

CONCLUSION:

AS ONE PROJECT ENDS, ANOTHER BEGINS

General Overview

The way in which Toni Morrison describes goodness during a 2017 interview with David Carrasco entitled “Writing Goodness and Mercy” is relevant to this project. In the interview Morrison expands upon the three definitions of goodness she gave during her Ingersoll Lecture at Harvard Divinity School in 2012. In her lecture, “Goodness: Altruism and the Literary Imagination,” Morrison identifies three categories of goodness present in her work: “1. Goodness taught and learned (a habit of helping strangers and/or taking risks for them). 2. Goodness as a form of narcissism, ego enhancement, or even a mental disorder. 3. Goodness as instinct, as a result of genetics (protecting one’s kin or one’s group)” (17). She sums up her understanding of goodness by saying it is the “acquisition of self-knowledge.” She goes on to say, “The protagonist really does learn something morally insightful that she or he did not know earlier on” (qtd. in Carrasco 244). The implication is that action will follow knowledge acquisition, and this implication applies to readers as well as protagonists, and, as I have argued based on Phelan’s ethical situations, authors and narrators too.

As exhibited in *Song of Solomon*, narrative ethics involving ethics of the told affects how an audience responds to the text. Milkman, who many would argue is undeserving of mercy, is granted it in such a way that it transforms him into an ethical agent. Through Pilate’s instruction and mercy, Milkman learns empathy and what it means to be responsible to another human being. Readers observe the lessons Milkman learns about life and himself, and they can be prompted to consider the ways in which they are called to extend mercy to others. The novel

intercedes on readers' behalf, illuminating the horrors of Jim Crow and the retributive violence it incited, but rather than leaving the reader in a place of hopeless anger or shame, this literary intercessor provides a way out of the violence through empathy and mercy.

In both *Meridian* and *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, ethics of the telling through implied author and narration affect the structure of the text and how readers perceive their obligation to respond ethically to the text. Meridian Hill and Zala Spencer are flawed individuals who end up discovering ways to effectively care for themselves and other people. Incidentally, Meridian is most effective when working by herself on behalf of others whereas Zala functions best when she can tap into the strength present in a coalitional group. Care and equity are their ultimate goals, but they differ in their means. The disparate models provide hope for readers who want to engage in communal good as a response to their hermeneutical reading but are not comfortable subscribing to a prescriptive model.

All three of the novels make a case for moving through retributive violence instead of enacting it. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison shows how tortured Robert Smith, Porter, and even Guitar are by their retaliatory work as Seven Days men. In *Meridian*, Meridian is inspired to volunteer for the Revolution when faced with violence, but she comes to understand that nonviolent methods are necessary for her spiritual well-being. Finally, the parents in *Those Bones* understand that acts of violence will not bring their missing or murdered children home. Enacting a feminist ethic of care is useful in determining how individuals and communities can stop the cycle of retributive violence. In addition, coalitions are instrumental in working through a variety of social and political problems that rise from an intersection of racial, sexual, and class oppression. These three novels collectively model ways to engage in self-transformation instead of resorting to retributive violence.

Acknowledging Skepticism

In this project, I acknowledge that people engage in reading for a variety of purposes, and that for some, reading serves more than merely informational or entertainment purposes. I see reading as a valuable experience for the reflexivity it prompts from readers and for the way in which it can challenge hegemony. Reflexivity is significant to readers' processing of a text because it encourages readers to question their own biases, privilege, and interests. Examining oneself through one's interpretation of a text not only reveals patterns of the text but also patterns of life. Facing the hard truths reflexivity reveals opens the space for reader response, particularly an ethical response where readers acknowledge that they are accountable to more upon having read a text.

As firmly as I believe that literature can activate people as ethical agents, I acknowledge that others disagree. They might see the aesthetic value of literature and read for enjoyment but do not believe ethics are embedded into a work's structure or accept literature's intercessory power to lead readers through to self-discovery. Famed lawyer, Richard Posner, is one such critic of ethical criticism, claiming there is no place for ethical judgments in literary or aesthetic criticism. Tom Tomlinson, who is in the field of medicine, is another such critic who does not believe reading affects people's moral development (124).⁵⁶ The largest question is likely how understanding literature affects people's actions and sense of ethical obligation. In literature, establishing a link between theory and praxis may indeed be more difficult than in the sciences, hard or behavioral, but it can be done even though a case study is beyond the scope of this literary analysis.

⁵⁶ Tomlinson's phrasing is comical and worth quoting: "Before setting [this claim] aside, I'll just note that my more literary acquaintances are nice to sit down with for a chew and a chat, but I can't say that I've noticed any generally higher level of ethical acumen among them than is found among the rest of us in the herd" (124). Tomlinson believes in narrative ethics inasmuch as it addresses analytical gaps rather than helping to develop empathy.

The link between ethical principles and readers' response comes through the text itself and the way in which it invites readers into ethical situations embedded into the narrative structure. For Phelan, this link is established through the four ethical situations discussed in this project, including readers' responses that encompass cognitive, emotional, and ethical (*Living* 22). Of course, it is possible for readers to deny an obligation to a text. They may read, enjoy (or dislike), and put aside. In this way, reading is merely a private, perfectly respectable affair; however, literature also has the capacity for more. Literature may compel readers to be publicly accountable for their private reading and risk putting their interpretation next to someone else's. This accountability is difficult to quantify and is often anecdotal, but that does not disprove its existence. After reading a book called *Irresistible Revolution*, my husband and I chose not to purchase new clothes for over a year so as not to contribute to child labor in textile factories. We made a concrete ethical choice based on characters with which we were confronted. This is but one, small example of how a reader can be motivated into ethical action through reading.

While I acknowledge the argument that some readers do not heed an ethical obligation to a text, I also see the value when a private reading becomes a public one where one accepts an invitation to self-examination and real change. Even if transformation does not take place, increased awareness is invaluable. In a recent interview, Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative says, "Until we reckon with history, we're not going to be free" ("Acknowledging," par. 13). He is counting on people to face the ugly truths of the past and commit to never repeating it. If reading a text informs a reader about racial injustice in place since slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow, then that increased awareness is bound to affect that person's sense of the magnitude of current inequities, and acknowledging past acceptance of false narratives is a way to form a new common memory that paves a path toward racial reconciliation and reduction in racial

violence. At the very least, a hermeneutical narrative ethic reading of a text can complement and certainly not deter other critical approaches to the interpretation of a text.

In addition to skepticism regarding the narrative ethics' efficacy in activating readers as ethical agents, I acknowledge a second vein of skepticism regarding my project's stance against retributive violence: throughout history, changes in policy and practice have been won using violence. Riots, industrial violence, and slave revolts have been attempts, some victorious, by those at the lower end of a power differential to obtain equity or freedom. In the United States' history, groups like the Black Panthers have countered police violence and hate groups with deadly violence. In a kill-or-be-killed scenario, it is difficult to fault someone for preserving their own life. Even when the violence one is facing is going to harm or maim but not kill, many argue it is reasonable to fight back and meet violence with violence. Especially when violence is used to confront corrupt officials and unjust laws, the actions may be deemed acceptable.

While I recognize the impulse toward self-preservation, violence generally has the propensity to incite more violence, creating an endlessly cyclical effect. Violence is certainly not the only means to confront injustice. As Richard Hofstadter says of violence in the United States, "If violence sometimes works, it does not follow that nothing but violence works" ("Reflections," par. 55). He notes that more frequently in the United States, social reform has been accomplished through education and propaganda. Literature can be the mode of both education and propaganda; therefore, it is reasonable to subscribe to literature's power to move people through violence without enacting violence on their path toward personal and social transformation.

Recommendations and Future Work

The most obvious extension of this project would be to embed the theoretical framework into a literature course. Much like the literature course I describe in my introduction, I would have students read novels and then, through the course content and pedagogy,⁵⁷ encourage ethical reasoning and action. Courses specifically focused on ethics are a curricular staple in disciplines like medicine and business, but there is a place for ethics in literary study as well. I envision an intentional inventory in the form of a pre/post-test,⁵⁸ asking students the way in which their ethical positioning has been affected by their reading and how that has manifested into concrete action.

If activating readers as ethical agents to avoid violence is a worthwhile venture, it must span beyond the college classroom. For one, not everyone has access to a college education. Additionally, college is a limited time in one's life, but the work of self-transformation does not end. The methodology of examining the structure of texts is not isolated to formal discussion. *Coduction* can happen in a variety of mediums, particularly in web-cast writing through blog posts and subsequent comments. I have been a part of online communities where people were spurred on toward ethical action after stories of injustice convinced them. I do not want to see the transformative power of narrative pigeon-holed into small, privileged pockets of society.

⁵⁷ Matthew J. Mayhew and Patricia King describe the way in which curricular content as well as pedagogical strategies have bearing on college students' moral reasoning. The authors employed the strategies of "active learning, reflection, and faculty-student interaction" and found positive interaction with diverse peers to be important to growth in moral reasoning (17). Hurtado, et al. reach a similar conclusion about a positive link between diversity inclusion and gains in moral reasoning (201). Mayhew and King argue that curricular content which introduces theories of social justice can also contribute to students' growth in ethical reasoning (20), which is particularly relevant to my study.

⁵⁸ Mayhew and King's pre/post-test has students report on their background characteristics, including their "need for cognition" (or how critically they like to think) as well as their collegiate experiences, including their previous experience with moral content in coursework. Soliciting this background information can be helpful in determining students' ethical growth. Likewise, Throne conducted a pre/post-test in Composition classes to gauge students' growth in ethical reasoning and critical behavior. He used case studies to guide discussions, so my model using novels would be slightly different.

My dream for extending this project would be to incorporate the theoretical framework into a course within a prison or a re-entry program for newly released former prisoners. Texts like *Just Mercy* and *The Sun Does Shine* have strengthened a personal conviction I have felt for a long time. I desire to work with this vulnerable population and believe the work I have done in this study can contribute to more formal transformative justice strategies they encounter. I am interested in spending time listening to prisoners' stories and hearing about what would be most helpful to them as they transitioned back to life outside of prison. While I believe the concepts of narrative ethics, feminist ethics of care, and coalitional politics could infuse this population with hope and give them an alternative way to function in the world without engaging in retributive violence, dialoguing with prisoners in a course or re-entry program would help me understand their needs, perhaps unearthing an unspoken plea, as Toni Morrison says in *Song of Solomon*.

Current literature within the past five years suggests such courses on writing and literature are beneficial and increasing in number in prisons. In *Prison Pedagogies: Learning and Teaching with Imprisoned Writers*, Joe Lockard and Sherry Rankins-Robertson, who work with the Arizona State University Prison Education Program,⁵⁹ explain the importance of multifaceted pedagogies in prison settings: "Good prison pedagogies, like pedagogies anywhere else, offer a horizon of knowledge, the achievement of self-expression, the power and means for change, and hope" (4). With its focus on transformation, a literature class that intentionally focuses on hermeneutical narrative ethics as well as feminist ethics of care and coalitional politics would naturally fit within such pedagogies. Lockard and Rankins-Robertson also note pedagogies must acknowledge intersectionality and how social conditions have worked against many in the prison population. They draw a clear link between prison writing and teaching writing in prison and

⁵⁹ The ASU Prison Education Program (formerly the Prison English Program) is one of the preeminent programs for prison education in the country.

social justice. For my purposes, the essays within the *Prison Pedagogies* book will help me understand and attend to prisoners' motivation for studying and writing. As seen in *The Sun Does Shine*, even an informal book club⁶⁰ for prisoners provides a mental and emotional escape from harsh conditions and can provide motivation for self-transformation.

A motivating factor for me to be involved is my belief that education is a human right and that being educated changes people's capacity to act ethically, which ultimately affects the person and the larger community after one's release.⁶¹ Higher education programs in prisons work to humanize inmates who are otherwise stuck in a system that ignores their personhood. Lockard says, "Prisoners are engaged in the life of the imagination, just like the rest of us. They're just as human" (qtd. in McClelland, par. 19). Writing and literature classes within prisons provide a structured outlet that can lead to introspection, personal growth, and even changes to an unjust system as prisoners share their experiences and insights. As Will McClelland notes, prison education can reduce a released prisoner's likelihood of committing a crime and returning to prison by up to 43 percent (par. 11). If I can contribute to someone's rehabilitation by teaching them literature, showing them there is a way to live ethically and avoid violence, and opening an outlet for them to share their voice, I am compelled to do just that.

In the *Meridian* chapter, I refer to Latasha Morrison's steps for racial reconciliation, noting that lament is the first one. The next one she identifies is making reparations, and I consider a prison course one way for me as a white woman to do that. It is widely documented

⁶⁰ The warden allowed Hinton and six other death-row prisoners to hold a monthly book club for a time. Hinton's motivation was helping the other prisoners escape in their mind and proving to both prisoners and guards that these men were worthy of reading and critically thinking about texts (177). One white prisoner, Henry, was on death row for lynching a black male. His family had taught him to hate blacks, yet he was transformed on death row as a result of the book club and his interactions with other prisoners. As Hinton says, "Death row saved [Henry's] soul (194).

⁶¹ Alec Muthig affirms the effect of prison education on a greater community in "Education Helps Rehabilitate Prisoners." He notes that prison education allows prisoners to consider their roles in society and place within a community (par. 4).

that people of color, especially black men, are incarcerated at a rate much higher than whites. Likewise, materially poor people are also incarcerated at a higher rate. Using the privileged knowledge I have gained through earning a terminal degree to empower those in that vulnerable group is a fitting way for me to make reparations and lead others away from retributive violence and toward a common memory that acknowledges the pain of past injustice and the ways in which injustice continues to be entangled in every thread of contemporary American society. Only then is there hope for true transformation.

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