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POST-SOUL SPECULATION: AN EXPLORATION OF AFRO-SOUTHERN SPECULATIVE  
FICTION

A Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts

in the Department of Southern Studies

The University of Mississippi

by

HILARY M. WORD

May 2020

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an examination of female authored, post-soul, Afro-Southern speculative fiction. The specific texts being examined are *My Soul to Keep* by Tananarive Due, *Stigmata* by Phyllis Alesia Perry, and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward. Through exploration of these texts, I posit two large arguments. First, I posit that this thesis as a collective work illustrates how women-authored Afro-Southern speculative fiction based in the post-soul era embodies and champions womanist politics and praxis critical for liberation through speculative elements. Second, I assert that this thesis is demonstrative of how this particular type of fiction showcases the importance of specificity of setting and reflects other, often erased facets of African American identity and realities by centering the experiences of contemporary Black Southerners. This thesis also attends to several smaller arguments that may be particular to an individual chapter or chapters. First, Afro-Southern cultural markers are critical to freedom-making and identity-making processes. Next, speculative elements are used to connect post-soul readers to complicated pasts as well as to explore how the past influences the present and the future. Additionally, the texts disrupt the erasure of modern rural and small town Black Southerners. Lastly, the employment of superficial examples of integration in connection to ideas surrounding linear progress is critiqued. Ultimately, this thesis endeavors to present a complicated contemporary South and the possibilities that it holds for change.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is broadly dedicated to every single person who has helped me, encouraged me, supported me throughout the entirety of my academic career. However, this work is also specifically dedicated to my wonderful parents, Larry and Anita Dorsey-Word, who instilled a deep love for reader and books in me at an early age and who have loved and supported me unconditionally. Thank you for everything you have done for me.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Angela Green of the University of Mississippi's Writing and Rhetoric department. I learned so much about writing from her class and through my time as a Graduate Writing Fellow under her guidance, and I am grateful for the opportunity to have worked with her.

Finally, I would like to thank all of my fellow Southern Studies graduate students for always being supportive and willing to lend an ear or offer advice. I wish you all the best in everything that you choose to do.

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## INTRODUCTION

Within the last decade, Afrofuturism as a movement gained a renewed momentum and permeated various forms of media, including film, television, music, and literature, and has helped inspire a renewed interest in Black speculative works across various mediums. Marvel's wildly successful film adaptation of Marvel's *Black Panther* helped usher in some of this *Black Panther* follows the story of a fictional, highly technologically advanced African nation never touched by colonialism that is led and protected by the superhero Black Panther. The movie inspired the creation of various articles and think pieces highlighting the significance of Afrofuturism as a movement as well as delineating its long legacy of progressive renderings of possible futures from Afro-diasporic perspectives. At the same time, musicians like Janelle Monae and Solange have been the subjects of analysis for their latest projects, *Dirty Computer* and *When I Get Home*, respectively, for their queer and Afrofuturist themes. Within the field of literature, Nigerian-American author Tomi Adeyemi's 2018 debut novel based on Yoruba folklore and spiritual cosmologies, *Children of Blood and Bone*, garnered impressive levels of success. The novel inspired scholars and writers to think again about the potentialities of Afrofuturist and Black speculative literature. Nigerian-American author and English professor Nnedi Okorafor has furthered discussions around Afrofuturism by championing "African Futurism," a concept related to Afrofuturism that centers the work of writers from the African continent. Her popular 2010s works include the *Akata* series, the *Binti* series, and the stand-alone novel *Who Fears Death*. *New York Times* best-selling and Hugo-Award winning Black

American fantasy author N.K. Jemisin has aroused an interest in scholars and fellow writers in more fluid conceptions of Black fantasy with her 2010s works such as the *Inheritance Trilogy*, the *Broken Earth* series, the *Dreamblood* duology, and her collections of short stories. Most interestingly, this renaissance Afrofuturism movement has helped revive an interest in the works of older African-American writers. In particular, the late African-American science fiction author Octavia Butler, who is best known for her works like *Kindred*, the *Parable* series, the *Patternist* series, and *Fledgling*, has received a tremendous amount of revitalized interest in her work from scholars and casual fans alike. The broader public has also focused a revived interest in legendary late African-American author Toni Morrison's works because of their speculative elements, especially her massively influential 1987 novel *Beloved*. The developments I have traced so far are by no means comprehensive. However, this snapshot of a particular moment in the history of a broader artistic movement helped me develop more confidence to pursue my thesis topic.

This thesis asserts several claims as a whole work and in individual chapters. First, I posit that this thesis as a collective work demonstrates how women-authored, Afro-Southern speculative fiction based in the post-soul era embodies and champions womanist politics and praxis critical for liberation through speculative elements. Second, I posit that this thesis illustrates how post-soul Afro-Southern speculative fiction reflects other facets of African American identity and realities by centering the experiences of contemporary Black Southerners while also showcasing the importance of specificity of setting. On a smaller scale, this thesis makes arguments particular to an individual chapter or chapters. In one chapter, I assert that the text demonstrates how Afro-Southern cultural markers are critical to freedom and identity-making processes. In another chapter, I assert that the author uses speculative elements to

connect post-soul readers to a complicated past and highlight how that past influences the present and future through the site of the Black masculine. In another chapter, I demonstrate how the text disrupts the erasure of modern rural Black Southerners and critiques the use of superficial examples of integration in connection to ideas surrounding linear progress. Ultimately, I hope that this thesis presents a complicated contemporary South and the possibilities that it holds for change. Afro-Southern speculative fiction is a compelling medium that helps showcase this potential for real-life modification.

The contemporary Afrofuturism renaissance I described earlier is only one factor in the synthesis of influences throughout my life that would inspire this thesis. I think it is crucial, in order to situate my connection to this work as well as to delineate the path that birthed it, to use this introductory chapter to discuss the many influences and their synthesis which helped lay the foundation of what would become this project. To be honest, my journey to my chosen topic has been a bit of an unexpected one; however, my interest in the larger world of speculative fiction has been present since I was a small child. I can remember reading books featuring African-American folktales my mother had purchased for me. The late, noteworthy African-American children's author Virginia Hamilton was one of my favorite authors, because I adored her folktale books, *The People Could Fly* and *Her Stories*. I was also immensely attracted to the mythologies and cosmologies of different cultures. I devoured Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, which centered on Greek mythology. Japanese, Norse, Chinese, Irish, Haitian, and Jamaican mythologies and folklore also all fascinated me, and I searched for other forms of speculative fiction across media. I eventually stumbled upon my father's comic book collection. Superheroes represented possibilities of mythic proportion beyond the reach of folklore I had previously consumed (although many superheroes have abilities and background stories based on various

folkloric elements from different cultures) while also offering a sense of grounding in reality because of their placements in contemporary, analogous locations. I really enjoyed DC comics' Batman, a true Byronic hero who possesses no superpowers beyond tremendous wealth, a genius intellect, and Olympic level athleticism. Batman took on the responsibility of protecting Gotham City (which is based on New York and Chicago) from villains as deranged, diabolical, and often superpowered or genetically enhanced as the Joker, the Penguin, Harley Quinn, Poison Ivy, Bane, and more. Marvel Comics' superhero team of mutants, the X-Men, included heroes with varied and amazing abilities who live in and must protect a society that hates and discriminates against mutants, interpersonally and systematically. The social justice themes of *X-Men* resonated with me and many other fans, both casual and devoted. X-Men's inclusion of powerful female mutants like the Kenyan-Black American weather mutant Storm and Mississippi-born energy and power absorber mutant Rogue also intrigued me. Their inclusion subconsciously pushed me to try and find more speculative stories that were centered on and examined through the experiences of women and girls.

Fast-forwarding to my middle school years, Utah-born author Stephanie Meyers's wildly successful *Twilight* series debuted, and adolescent and teenage girls across the United States and around the world became acquainted with vampires in accessible, palatable manifestations. The *Twilight* series made a dent in U.S. popular culture, and soon, the vampires found in Gothic literature classics like Bram Stoker's *Dracula* were exchanged for sparkly, angsty, and handsome modern vampires like *Twilight*'s primary male protagonist Edward. The *Twilight* series followed the story of teenage Bella Swan, who has moved to a new town to live with her father. As the new girl in school and town, Bella is quiet and shy, but finds herself drawn to the beautiful and brooding Edward Cullen, whom readers and Bella eventually find out is a vampire. Bella also

meets and eventually befriends Jacob Black, a Native American werewolf, and Meyer eventually develops a passionate, topsy-turvy love triangle between the three characters that inspired an even deeper level of plot investment from fans. Eventually, Edward comes out victorious in the triangle as he and Bella marry and have a child named Esme. Critics rightfully critiqued *Twilight* for some of its problematic undertones regarding romantic relationships. On another level, however, the series also received quite a bit of vitriol from the public. People resented the books for being a non-literary fiction series geared at young girls and women that focused primarily on relationships, romantic and otherwise, through the experiences of a young, shy teenage girl coming into her own. Still, I was fascinated by *Twilight's* ability to mobilize such a massive demographic of fans in such intense ways. It became clear to me that female-driven speculative fiction, even of the romantic variety, had the power to facilitate a level of introspection and meditation on love, sex, romance, and relationships among young women and girls across diverse backgrounds in modern U.S. society in relatable and engaging ways. As such, I knew I needed to find yet again, more female-driven, contemporary speculative fiction works.

Moving forward in middle school, I, along with many other teenagers, discovered Suzanne Collins' 2008 dystopian, action, and romance *Hunger Games* trilogy. The *Hunger Games* trilogy is set in the post-apocalyptic, dystopian world of Panem, a nation in North America divided into multiple districts. Readers follow the story of a teenage girl named Katniss Everdeen, who is from district 12, one of the poorer districts in Panem that was formerly (or is at least based on) Appalachian coal country. Each year, all of the twelve districts send two tributes, a boy and a girl, to compete to the death in a battle-royale style tournament as a form of entertainment for the wealthy capital's elite. One fateful year, Katniss's sickly and delicate younger sister Primrose is chosen in the lottery to become the female tribute, and Katniss

volunteers to go in her sister's place. As the story unfolds across the trilogy, Katniss emerges as a victor of the Hunger Games, a rebellion leader, a devoted and loving sister and daughter, and a young girl caught in a love triangle between her childhood friend Gale and her partner during the Hunger Games, Peeta. The *Hunger Games* was, like *Twilight*, very popular with adolescent and teenage girls. Additionally, however, young male audiences and adult audiences across genders reacted very positively to the series. Presumably, the revolutionary themes, the well-developed critique of the worst effects of capitalism and war and their potential for massive oppression, and the post-apocalyptic, dystopian- adventure lens all helped attract fans from unexpected demographics. And yet, at its core, it is also easy to read the story as one that ultimately focuses on relationships. Relationships, whether between lovers, family members, comrades, or governments and their citizens, throughout the story serve as a vehicle to analyze ideas about power, class, gender, and race in subtle but relatable contexts. Once again, I was struck by the power of female-drive speculative fiction works to initiate discussions among the public about romantic relationships, the psychological horrors of war, the oppressive potentialities of capitalism, the beauty of familial bonds, and the corrupting influence of power all at once. For me, Katniss's identity as an Appalachian girl and eventually, woman who was being positioned as the series' front and center fomenter of change and catalyst of revolution was also quite powerful. Although Appalachia as a geographical region includes areas of states that are generally not categorized as part of the South, Appalachia as a whole is still heavily identified and associated with the South and Southern sub-cultures and Katniss's home in coal-mining country District 12 evokes images of East Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia, and western North Carolina. In her own, perhaps unconscious way, author Suzanne Collins intentionally or unintentionally posited the South as the breeding ground for radical revolution and radical

revolutionaries. I liked that. I liked the idea of a speculative world where the South was front and center, not as an object of contempt, but as a contested space with the capabilities untold.

In the midst of my fascination with *The Hunger Games*, I was also taking greater notice of Southern authors whose works, while not speculative or at least speculative in the same way as Suzanne Collins' works, at least showcased the South as a complicated space with boundless potential. I spent a great deal of time reading Afro-Southern and Euro-Southern authors that helped me develop an appreciation for the scope of Southern literature. Alice Walker and *The Color Purple*, Zora Neale Hurston and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Richard Wright and *Native Son*; Tennessee Williams and *A Streetcar Named Desire*; Eudora Welty and many of her short stories; Rick Bragg and *All Over But the Shoutin'*; Truman Capote and Harper Lee, among others, all made me think about the significance of the South as a place and what it meant to be from a place like the South. These authors helped me think about a South where race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect in messy, often painful, ways and how that intersection makes the South an incredibly fertile space for change. The works of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston like *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, respectively, were really intriguing and rousing to my younger self, because they were women-centered and women-driven Afro-Southern stories that really valued the interiors and complexities of Afro-Southern life in Jim Crow Georgia and Florida. With that said, these aforementioned examples of Afro-Southern and Euro-Southern literature and literary figures are also not where the list of influences on my work ends.

Moving into my high school years, I was still quite drawn to speculative fiction and searched frequently for new series to read. I eventually found myself consuming non-Southern speculative fiction like Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series as well as legendary fantasy author

Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* series. I was also enjoying my Southern literature, but my Southern fiction and speculative fiction literary interests rarely seemed to intersect. I soon realized I wanted something new that would bridge the two and center a speculative South. It was not very long before I found Arkansas-born and raised author Charlaine Harris. Harris had published many mysteries books and series, most of which were not overtly speculative. However, as a fourteen year old, I discovered her *Southern Vampire Mysteries* series which combined urban fantasy, mystery, and romance all in one wildly popular series of books that would eventually be adapted to a television series on HBO called *True Blood*. These mystery novels, also called the *Sookie Stackhouse Novels*, were set in the contemporary South (primarily northern Louisiana, New Orleans, and Dallas) and followed the story of Sookie Stackhouse, a reserved, young telepathic barmaid. Sookie's telepathic abilities have made it difficult for her to be around regular humans and as such, she leads a somewhat isolated existence. However, when she runs into the charming and chivalrous Bill Compton, a vampire who was once a landowner and Confederate soldier, her life is turned upside down. Vampires in Sookie's world have entered into the spotlight, and humans acknowledge their existence. However, vampires, along with other supernatural creatures and humans who associate with supernatural creatures, are still ostracized. Sookie does not mind being around supernatural creatures though, as when she meets Bill and other non-human creatures including other vampires, Were creatures, fairies, and more, she meets beings whose minds she cannot read. Sookie's foray into this underground supernatural world has its twists and turns as she tries to solve mysteries that emerge around her and figure out her relationship with Bill and other supernatural love interests whom she meets over the course of the series.

As mentioned previously, the *Sookie Stackhouse* books were very popular and were even successful enough to have a long-running television adaption on HBO called *True Blood*. I thoroughly enjoyed the novels, and many of my friends enjoyed them as well. Although some readers have taken issue with Charlaine Harris' emphasis on romantic relationships throughout the series, the books remained solidly speculative and offered an accessible imagining of a contemporary speculative Deep South space that utilized speculative elements as well as relationships as vehicles to analyze issues of race, gender, sexuality, class, and power. *True Blood's* huge popularity as a television show demonstrated how many viewers across the U.S. were deeply comfortable with demonizing the South for its function as a perpetually traumatized and haunted space while also believing that its identity as a ruptured space was perfect for the speculative and the supernatural to be showcased to their fullest potential. The seeds had been planted; I felt more and more sure of the South's potential as a contested space that could be radical. It had bred various forms of activism (which I had learned from previous examples of fiction I devoured), but also functioned as a "haunted space" in how it could be the emergent home for speculative renderings in popular culture in the United States.

I ended up attending Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi, and because I was a busy student majoring in history, I was not devoting nearly as much time as I had at one point to consuming speculative fiction. I was still a big speculative fan though as I still thoroughly enjoyed decompressing through marathons of *Star Trek*, *Justice League*, and *Justice League Unlimited*. Despite being a history major, I took many English courses and was introduced and reintroduced to more influential writers and their texts, all of which deeply impacted my thinking. I consumed more Southern fiction through texts of Southern authors whose work I had been previously been unfamiliar with like Jesmyn Ward, Natasha Trethewey, Barry Hannah, and

more. I also read more unfamiliar works from familiar Southern writers Richard Wright, Tennessee Williams, and Eudora Welty. These authors and their books helped reaffirm an earlier message I had picked up about the significance of specificity of place and the value of centering the U.S. South in fiction. Afro-Mississippian author Jesmyn Ward's National Book Award-winning novel *Salvage the Bones* was particularly rousing for me. Situated in a small Mississippi Gulf Coast community just days before Hurricane Katrina wrought havoc, *Salvage the Bones* centered the stories of a young working-class Afro-Mississippian girl named Esch and her family. Ward used a small, working-class rural Black community as seen through the eyes of fifteen year old girl to narrate the complicated realities of post-soul rural Afro-Mississippian life and to also highlight the devastating effects of natural disasters on poor, rural communities. Ward centered Afro-Southerners in poignant, deeply affecting modes. The message of Ward and these other important literary figures was clear: the South, especially, the Afro-South, had nearly limitless promise as window into understanding intertwined issues of class, race, gender, and religion.

In addition to Southern fiction, my English courses introduced me to Black female social and cultural theorists and writers whose work resonated with my interests in myriad ways. Angela Davis and her landmark work, *Women, Race, and Class* challenged me to think about identity in more complex ways and helped me articulate the value I saw in African-American women's intellectual and social history. bell hooks and her groundbreaking work *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* helped me think about the value of Black feminist theory and praxis in both my academic and non-academic experiences. Importantly, these English courses also reacquainted me with Alice Walker through her nonfiction work, and I was introduced to an influential organizing theory and praxis that has been elaborated upon

throughout this thesis: womanism. I am truly appreciative for my introduction and re-introduction these writers and theorists during such a formative time of my life.

I am also very thankful for my experience as a history major. Afro-Southern cultural and social history deeply fascinated me, and I spent a great deal of time learning about various Afro-Southern civil rights, social justice, and economic movements as well as activists like Fannie Lou Hamer, Unita Blackwell, Dorothy Lee Bolden, Annie Devine, Ella Baker, Septima Clark, Lucy Parsons, Addie L. Wyatt, and more. These women's accomplishments impressed me tremendously, and their existence and activism as a testament to the South's function as a space ripe for radical upheaval and change, particularly when at the grassroots level and female-driven, struck me deeply. My studies in history made me more and more concerned with the concept of past and how the past could be reconciled to both the present and the future, particularly in the South broadly and Mississippi specifically. The past seemed to loom heavily across the South (and rightfully so, in many cases), because of its position as a space that had been a site of tremendous historical and contemporary trauma. Trying to understand the issues of contemporary Mississippi, the South and the rest of the United States seemed entirely dependent upon understanding the various and intersecting histories and experiences of people of the past. Still, even as history as a discipline helped me satisfy my desire for a deeper understanding of the past and the very concept of a past, I found myself feeling that the discipline could not quite satiate all of my intellectual interests. After taking a course on Black religions during my junior year, I became interested all over again in the African American folklore and folk traditions that had captivated me so much as a child. I decided that if I was going to pursue graduate school, I would need to enter into an interdisciplinary program, and so, I did.

Fortunately, I ended up in a Master of Arts program for Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi. I initially decided that my thesis work would focus on African American folklore and blues in the Mississippi Hill Country. Folklore and the Hill Country region of Mississippi still deeply fascinate me and are of personal significance to me as my father's side of the family is from and resides in the Hill Country region. However, my program introduced me to so many different scholars and their works, and I became interested in other topics as well. I was stumbling upon new (for me) and impressive ideas each class period because of these scholars and their work. For example, African-American sociologist and native-Memphian Zandria S. Robinson's *This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South* served as an accessible example of ethnography and helped me understand how other Afro-Southerners, specifically Black Memphians, conceptualized and articulated identity as Black Southerners in a post-Civil Rights Movement South. Historian Tera Hunter's groundbreaking monograph *To Joy My Freedom* was a wonderful working-class and labor history text examining the lives and experiences of Black working-class women as well as their labor strikes in Atlanta after the end of the Civil War and through the end of Reconstruction. Hunter's work again highlighted the subversive underbelly of the South as ripe for change, especially when enacted through the lives of Black Southern women. The text also demonstrated how African-Americans were constantly negotiating processes and meanings of freedom before and after the Civil War. Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands* helped me think seriously about the importance and value of the lens of the interstitial or "in-between" spaces. Scholar Leslie Bow's *Partly Colored* examines the experiences of Asian-Americans in the Jim Crow South as an interstitial or in-between caste. *Partly Colored* illuminated the absolute insanity and constant labor that went in to negotiating racial and class hierarchies across the U.S. South. Sociologist

Clyde Woods' *Development Arrested* and historian Greta de Jong's *You Can't Eat Freedom* elevated the tradition of labor and social justice organizing, theorizing, and activism among rural, working-class Black Southern communities in ways that reminded me of the tradition of communitarian politics in Afro-Southern spaces and how freedom was and is constantly in a state of negotiation for Afro-Southerners.

The academic work I was consuming was pushing me further and further to expand my ideas about the South, especially the Black South, in really valuable ways. Despite this valuable push, I was still a bit unclear about what I wanted to do for my thesis work. I knew I wanted to incorporate the Black South in anything I would do, but my ideas remained nebulous at best. One day, in the midst of trying to survive my first year as a graduate student, I stumbled upon a book that I read in undergrad by independent scholar Ytasha L. Womack called *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. The book traced the origins of the term Afrofuturism as well as key figures in music, film, television, and literature who consciously or unconsciously helped propel and maintain Afrofuturism as a culturally based artistic movement. The book helped me remember the name and history behind the movement's latest iteration that emerged with the arrival of the *Black Panther* film; the arrival of authors like Tomi Adeyemi, N.K. Jemisin, and Nnedi Okorafor; the newest releases of music by artists like Janelle Monae and Solange, and the renewal of interest in older Black speculative fiction by authors like Octavia Butler and Toni Morrison. Still, I had unsettled feelings about what exactly I was interested in studying.

I felt more resolved after taking an African-American speculative fiction course in which I read Octavia Butler's groundbreaking 1979 time travel neo-slave narrative novel, *Kindred*. In *Kindred*, readers follow the story of an African-American woman named Dana who lives in Los

Angeles and who is in an interracial marriage with her White husband, Kevin. Dana is thrust back in time to antebellum Maryland where she encounters two of her ancestors: an enslaved Black woman named Alice and a White male slaveholder named Rufus. As both Dana and Kevin are thrust between antebellum Maryland and 1970s Los Angeles, Dana begins to understand the psychological and physical brutality of chattel slavery. She also has to reconcile with the fact that she must, in order to preserve her future, ensure the safe birth of her ancestor Hagar, a child conceived out of coercion whose parents are Alice and Rufus. It is within *Kindred*, that I found the confidence to focus on a topic that had been creeping into my heart, but that I could not quite articulate before: African-American speculative fiction set in the post-Civil Rights Movement South. It is also with *Kindred* that readers see how speculative stories driven by and centered on Black women situated in the South hold great capacity for rupture and adaptation. Butler uses the power of the speculative to force her protagonist Dana to reconcile the past, present, and future. I wanted to see how other African-American women writers used speculative fiction to showcase radical or subversive ontologies.

Once I decided to explore African-American women's speculative fiction and academic work about it, I was pleasantly surprised by how many of examples of female African American authors and scholarship on their work existed. Since the 1960s and beyond, writers like Toni Morrison, Virginia Hamilton, Octavia Butler, Gloria Naylor, Jewelle Gomez, Phyllis Alesia Perry, Tananarive Due, LA Banks, N.K. Jemisin, Rivers Solomon, Dhonielle Clayton, Nisi Shawl and more have crafted an incredibly rich landscape of African-American women's speculative fiction. This rich landscape has inspired an incredible body of scholarship from African-Americanists and literary scholars. For example, Alma Jean Billingslea's 1999 work *Crossing Borders Through Folklore* examined how authors Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall

used folklore and folk magic in their novels to articulate different ideas about identity.

In literary scholar Ingrid Thaler's 2010 work, *Black Atlantic Speculative Fictions*, she examines Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower*; Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories*; and Caribbean-Canadian author Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*. She uses these novels in order to investigate an interest in "how these texts use the Black Atlantic as a vantage point for imagining speculative time spaces across past, present, and future. I wish to explore how the texts negotiate black cultural presence in the West as hybrid, blurring and thus substantially questioning concepts of white genres and black traditions" (Thaler 3). Thaler utilizes the concept of the Black Atlantic as a unifying organizing principle that illuminates how Afro-diasporic traditions syncretize with Euro-Western genres.

In Michelle D. Commander's 2017 groundbreaking work, *Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic*, she focuses on examining works like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* along with a host of other literary works. She does so in order to, "explore how African descendants on the New World have extended the legacy of the Flying Africans. Specifically, I examine how writers, tourists, urban planners, and activists imagined the Africa to which African descendants might return, belong, and feel free through the lens of what I refer to as Afro-Atlantic speculation: a series of imaginings, including literary texts, films, and production sites that envision return flights back to Africa" (Commander 3). Commander's *Afro-Atlantic Flight* is powerful, because it uses the medium of an Afro-diasporic folktale (the Flying Africans) to consider the ways that the African diaspora in the West constantly harkens back to Africa in various mediums of literature.

In African-Americanist and Caribbeanist literary scholar Kinitra D. Brooks' 2017 *Searching for Sycorax*, the scholar employs Black feminist literary theory within a Horror studies

lens in order to disrupt patterns of Black female erasure in horror. Brooks posits, “ I aim to find the black women in contemporary horror and critique the complex ways in which they manifest as characters, as creators, and as rebels to the conventions of both horror theory and black feminist theory (13). *Sycorax* is considered an essential Black Horror text, because Brooks employs Black feminist literary theory within Horror studies in order to disrupt patterns of Black female erasure in horror as a genre and as a field of study.

Finally, and most intriguingly, literary scholar Samantha Schalk’s 2018 work *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction*, Schalk analyzes Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Phyllis Alesia Perry as examples of speculative neo-slave narratives. Powerfully, Schalk asserts, “Speculative fiction can move people with disabilities , black women, and disabled black women from objects to subjects by making them the main characters, resisting stereotypes, and providing controlled, selected access into the various experiences of these populations” (Schalk 22). In *Bodyminds Reimagined*, Schalk illustrates the beauty of speculative fiction to call attention to the existence of Black women with disabilities as well as to center their experiences in ways that make them powerful, autonomous agents of change.

As evidenced by the aforementioned passages, there is truly a breadth and depth of African-American women’s speculative fiction and renderings and scholarship addressing those examples of fiction and renderings. I, too, wanted to enter into the academic conversations around African-American women’s speculative fiction, but in a context that I felt more uniquely positioned to write and discuss (i.e. a post-soul, Black Southern context). With that resolved, I decided to create this thesis as an exploration of African-American Southern (or alternately called Afro-Southern) speculative fiction written set in the “post-soul” South ( specifically

Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi) written by Afro-Southern women writers. I explore the following three texts: Florida native Tananarive Due's 1997 *My Soul to Keep*, Alabama-native Phyllis Alesia Perry's 1998 *Stigmata* and Mississippi native Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

Within the context of this thesis, I employ speculative fiction as a term that functions as an umbrella category of fiction that features elements significant to the plot that complicate the idea of the "unreal" or relate to the concept of the supernatural or mythic in some form. Some genres that fall under the umbrella of speculative fiction include horror, fantasy, science fiction, Southern Gothic, magical realism, time travel, supernatural, paranormal, urban fantasy, and superhero fiction, among others.

Some of the boundaries of this work are partially based on various factors that I identify closely with as a person. I am an African-American woman from Mississippi living in a post-soul United States and South. However, the framing of this work is also about my belief that stories written by women or driven by women (especially African-American women) as well as narratives that situate the South as a breeding ground of speculative renderings are the narratives that have the most explicit potential for radical imagination and wrestling with relationships between the past, present, and future. The South includes states like Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Texas, Louisiana, the Carolinas, Tennessee, Arkansas, Virginia, and Maryland. As a legacy of chattel slavery, many Southern states have had some of the most persistently oppressive racial and class hierarchies within the United States. Additionally, states like Mississippi, Georgia, Louisiana, and South Carolina historically have had very large percentages of African-Americans within their jurisdictions. Some of the most aggressive and noteworthy demonstrations of social upheaval addressing racial and economic disparities in the United States

have taken place in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Texas. Finally, many of the nations' most well-known, influential, and progressive African-American writers, leaders, and activists emerged from, had their work informed by, or situated their work within the South. Martin Luther King, Jr. from Georgia; Zora Neale Hurston from Florida; Richard Wright and Fannie Lou Hamer from Mississippi; Septima Clark from South Carolina; Bobby Seale and Barbara Jordan from Texas; Rosa Parks from Alabama; and Akasha Gloria Hull from Louisiana are all examples of progressive figures from the radical underbelly of the broader U.S. South. The South is a springboard for change, and speculative fiction allows readers to see that springboard even more clearly.

The term "post-soul" is also an organizing principle for this paper. Within the context of this work, I use Nelson George's rendering of post-soul. Nelson George, an African-American cultural scholar, was actually the first to use the term "post-soul." In his 2004 work *Post-Soul Nation: The Explosive, Contradictory, Triumphant, and Tragic 1980s as Experienced by African Americans (Previously Known as Blacks and Before that Negroes)*, he describes the meaning behind the term as:

The term "post-soul" defines the twisting, troubling, turmoil-filled, and often terrific years since the mid-seventies when black American moved into a new phase of its history to describe a time when American attempted to absorb the victories, failures, and ambiguities that resulted from the soul years. The post-soul years have witnessed an unprecedented acceptance of black people in the public life of America (9).

The "soul" years in the passage above are meant to be synonymous with the Civil Rights movement era years. As such, in George's context, a "post-soul" era translates to a post-Civil

Rights Movement era. I have chosen “post-soul” as an organizing principle, because I wanted to explore Afro-Southern stories that did not center the Civil Rights movement, and as such, center Whiteness in such a way that made Afro-Southerners objects within their own stories. To be clear, Civil Rights Movement era history and literature are important and valid. However, the post-Civil Right Movement or “post-soul” era allows us to move beyond stories where African-Americans are explicitly or implicitly objects of oppositional, larger undercurrents of Whiteness.

Throughout this paper, I have also argued that all of the texts featured illustrate some form of womanism or womanist ethic. Alice Walker first coined the term “womanist” in a 1979 short story entitled “Coming Apart.” In her 1983 essay collection, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Walker defines womanist as:

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 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.”

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 to lavender (8).

As the passages above illustrate, Walker’s rendering of womanism is evocative of love and beauty. Although it centers and stems from Black women, Walker’s womanism is inclusive of Black men and values freedom and the humanity of everyday ‘folk.’ It seeks liberation for all and values the ways people, especially Black women, cultivate joy. Although I believe it was necessary to at least provide the groundwork for womanism’s first usage, it is also important to note that Walker’s definition of womanism, while not subverted through the text, is not the primary definition of womanism that this thesis utilizes.

To be clear, when I discuss how a particular text demonstrates or champions a womanist organizing politic, I draw from Layli Phillips and *The Womanist Reader*. Phillips offers a more academic and expanded view of womanism compared to Walker’s when in *The Womanist Reader*, she notes:

Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women’s and other women of color’s everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the

environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. I take the perspective that womanism is not feminism. Its relationships to feminism (including Black feminism) are important, but its relationships to other critical theories and social-justice movements are equally important, despite being less frequently discussed or acknowledged...

Womanism manifests five overarching characteristics: (1) it is anti-oppressionist, (2) it is vernacular, (3) it is nonideological, (4) it is communitarian, and (5) it is spiritualized. “*Antioppressionist*” supersedes and organizes all labels that reference specific forms of oppression, such as antisexist, antiracist, anti-heterosexist, antihomophobic, antixenophobic, and the like, extending the reach of womanism into zones of oppression that may not be related to labelable identities and for which there is not even yet language... Indeed, womanism seeks to enable people to transcend the relations of domination and oppression altogether (21, 25).

Phillips’ definition and delineation of womanism and womanist characteristics are more academic than Walker’s literary prose rendering of womanism but still accessible. In particular, Phillip’s categorization of womanism’s characteristics was particularly helpful in illuminating how the various texts featured in the thesis embody womanist ethics. Phillips is very clear about womanism as its own entity, distinct from Black feminism, and she emphasizes that while stemming from Black women and girls’ experiences, womanism seeks to be inclusive and offer liberation to all of humanity.

I hope that my thesis helps expose the liberatory promise and potentialities of a complicated post-soul U.S. South. The thesis is organized chronologically. Chapter one focuses

on Tananarive Due and her 1997 novel *My Soul to Keep*. Chapter two focuses on Phyllis Alesia Perry and her 1998 novel *My Soul to Keep*. Chapter three focuses on Jesmyn Ward and her 2017 novel, *Sing Unburied, Sing*.

In the first chapter, I examine Tananarive Due and her work *My Soul to Keep*. I argue that the work illustrates several points. First, the novel centers the experiences of post-soul urban Black Floridians, complicates narrow monolithic ideas about what the South can be, and illustrates how Florida's place as a Southern state is related to the novel's speculative elements. Next, the novel uses speculative elements, through the site of the Black masculine, to connect post-soul readers to complicated pasts and showcase how the past influences the present and the future. Lastly, the novel champions and embodies womanist ethics and reflects the complex of Afro-Southern religious thought through its connection to speculative elements and the concept of a journey of belief.

In the second chapter, I demonstrate how journalist and author Phyllis Alesia Perry deals with the notion of "the past" in her speculative novel *Stigmata*. Through confrontation with speculative elements, she showcases the significance and necessity of post-soul generations of African-Americans engaging with traditional Black, Southern quotidian cultural inheritances and markers (especially those that are perceived as female-centered and/or driven) that link them to and help them heal complicated and painful histories. I also explore how she demonstrates how engagement with these Afro-Southern vernacular expressions also showcases a spectrum of Black folk humanity that is critical for working towards and through liberation as well as identity-making and place-making processes. Throughout this exploration, I foreground the womanist theory and praxis I have coined called the "quilt epistemology."

In the third chapter, I examine Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and how it achieves several directives. First, the novel calls attention to the existence of Black rural Southerners in a modern context, thus complicating ideas about rurality being a less "authentic" context of post-soul twenty-first century, Afro-Southern and African American identity while also illuminating how Mississippi as a setting facilitates some of the novel's speculative elements. Next, the novel uses the speculative as a vehicle to demonstrate the liberatory power, potentialities, and necessities of womanist, communitarian organization and engagement. Lastly, the novel critiques superficial examples of social integration that could be and often are used to indicate some sort of shallow, linear social progress. Throughout this examination, I foreground a term I have coined called "Black Paternal Inheritance." Black Paternal Inheritance as a framework helps explain *Sing, Unburied, Sing*'s protagonist's experience of 'speculative inheritance' Again, speculative fiction reveals the South's true aptitude for boundless change.

## CHAPTER ONE

African-American and Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction, particularly works published by women, have experienced and continue to experience a boom in popularity and publication in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. Scholar Gina Wisker argues that, “The success of [Toni] Morrison’s Nobel prize-winning *Beloved* (1987) caused critical debates about the role and legitimacy of speculative, supernatural, magical, and horror fictions for the expression of African American experience” (71). Important Afro-diasporic female writers who emerged in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s including Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler, Maryse Conde, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gloria Naylor became hugely influential to later post-soul generation writers who emerged in the 1990s and in the twenty-first century. Multiple voices would appear in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s who would become critical to the expansion of Afro-diasporic speculative fiction.

One such voice, Tananarive Due, and her 1997 novel *My Soul to Keep* are the subjects of this chapter. Due is a native of Tallahassee, Florida, and since the publication of *My Soul to Keep*, she has been a prominent figure in contemporary African-American speculative fiction. She has helped stimulate new conversations concerning the need to create more flexible frameworks for exploring the true literary value of Black horror and suspense texts. *My Soul to Keep* is the first book in Due’s successful *African Immortal* series. This chapter focuses on *My Soul to Keep* for its significance as a work of African-American speculative fiction work based primarily in a post-soul South Florida. Regarding sub-categorizations of her work, Due has

stated in an interview, “I really see myself as writing supernatural suspense...” (Glave 699). In addition to “supernatural suspense,” there are some audiences that firmly classify *My Soul to Keep* along with some of Due’s other novels as horror fiction. For example, Due has mentioned, “In horror circles, some writers describe me as a writer of ‘literary horror’” (Glave 700). Based on both of these quotations about the categorization of her work, I have chosen to describe *My Soul to Keep* as a supernatural suspense/horror text throughout this thesis. The speculative elements featured in this supernatural suspense/horror novel include the existence of immortal beings and rituals for acquiring immortality; the existence of ghosts; confirmation of the existence of a divinely imbued Jesus Christ, and the existence of blood with supernatural healing factors.

*My Soul to Keep* follows the story of Jessica and David Wolde, an educated and seemingly happily married Black couple living in 1990s Miami, Florida. Jessica Jacobs-Wolde is a successful African-American (with some distant Bahamian ancestry) journalist working for a local news source, the *Miami Sun News*. David Wolde is an Ethiopian former languages professor turned book translator and independent jazz scholar who met Jessica when she first took one of his Spanish classes at the University of Miami. After the two were no longer student and professor, they became a couple and eventually married and had their young daughter Kira, who seems to have a sensitivity to supernatural activity. One day, Jessica gets word of a news story in Chicago about the murder of an elderly African-American woman named Rosalie in a nursing home. Just as Jessica and one of her close co-workers Peter start thinking of using the case as a foray into writing a book about the abuse and neglect of elderly people in the United States, tragedies begin occurring. Readers soon learn that the tragedies are connected to David, who has been holding onto a massive secret; he is a five hundred year old immortal being whose

real name is Dawit, and he belongs to an exclusive male sect of immortals called the Life Brothers. David/Dawit and other members of the Life Brothers are allowed to mingle with normal mortals and even takes lovers and have children. However, it is strictly forbidden for them to reveal the secrets surrounding their immortality to outsiders, especially women, and Jessica's snooping threatens to expose David/Dawit's secret. Worse, some of the Life Brothers, including David/Dawit's former best friend Mahmoud, believe that David/Dawit has become too attached to the mortal world and view Jessica and Kira as threats that need to be extinguished. At the same time, David/Dawit's love and attachment to Jessica and Kira drives him to try to figure out how to make them immortal beings in order for the family to stay together forever.

Jessica and David/Dawit's journey to the truth in *My Soul to Keep* accomplishes several things. First, the novel centers the experiences of post-soul urban Black Floridians, complicates narrow, monolithic ideas about what the South can be, and illustrates how Florida's place as a Southern state is related to the novel's speculative elements. Next, the novel uses speculative elements, through the site of the Black masculine, to connect post-soul readers to complicated pasts and showcase how the past influences the present and the future. Lastly, the novel champions and embodies womanist ethics and also reflects the complexities of Afro-Southern theological thought through its connection to speculative elements and the concept of a journey of belief.

### **Florida As an Important Post-Soul Afro-Southern Setting**

Place or setting is intensely important as a concept in literature and other disciplines. This is especially true for places or spaces that evoke complex and at times, contradictory associations and ideologies. Geographer Tim Cresswell has noted on the topic of place:

...place is not just a thing in the world but a way of understanding the world. While we hold common-sense ideas of what places are, these are often quite vague when subjected to critical reflection...But place is also a way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world. When we look at the world as a world of places, we see different things. We see attachments and connections between people and place. We see worlds of meaning and experience (19).

From Cresswell's perspective, place is more than simple geography; place is a synthesis of many different factors that combine to form a specific point of view. If readers apply Cresswell's sense of place to any text they read, they begin seeing the value of place more fully.

In the case of *My Soul to Keep*, despite jumping around to different places and time periods, the novel is set primarily in Miami, Florida, in the late 1990s. By choosing 1990s Miami as the setting for her work, Due not only frees herself from having to center narratives of the Civil Rights Movement, she also reflects another dimension of African-American realities. Starting in the 1970s, African-Americans began moving to major cities in the South as part of a movement sometimes called a "reverse migration." As a native Floridian, Due's choice to use Florida as a base setting for her *African Immortals* series is not surprising. Viewing Florida as a rich literary setting, Due has stated, "Florida, particularly Miami, is a wonderfully fertile ground for writers. There are so many cultures and so many bizarre stories" (Glave 697). For Due, Florida is a beautiful cornucopia of influences perfect for the literary world. Still, while Due's view of Florida is positive, it is worth noting that Florida is a state with a complicated rendering in the U.S. public's imagination. On the one hand, Florida is positively associated with entities like Disney World, the popular 1980s sitcom *Golden Girls*, sunny weather, rich cultural diversity through its large and established Caribbean population, and comical images of elderly, retired

transplants from the Northeast, among other things. However, not all of the entities associated with the state of Florida can or should be constructed so positively. Within the past few decades, Florida has become a prominent fixture within U.S. media outlets. The revelation of the exploitation and virtual enslavement of agricultural workers that facilitated the creation of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in 1993; the murder of unarmed Black teen Trayvon Martin by “vigilante” George Zimmerman in 2012; the prosecution of domestic abuse survivor Marissa Alexander 2012 that negated Florida’s “stand your ground” laws regarding self-defense; and most recently, the Stone Douglas High School shooting in 2018 are all incidents that have forced the nation to turn its eyes to Florida in confusion and dismay (Rothberg) (Wilkerson).

Some of the confusion concerning these incidents is related to Florida’s contested cultural designation in relation to other socio-cultural regions of the United States. The various incidents that have taken place in Florida over the span of the last few decades seem decidedly regressive for a nation-state that often considers itself a cradle of progressive thought and praxis. For much of the country’s history since the end of the Civil War, ideologies seen as backwards or repressive are often relegated to the South as a region. Historian Edward Ayers has written:

Americans believe, hope, the South is different and so tend to look for differences to confirm that belief, that “knowledge.”...The South plays a key role in the nation’s self-image: the role of evil tendencies overcome, of mistakes atoned for, of progress yet to be made. Before it can play that role effectively, the South has to be set apart as a distinct place that carries certain fundamental characteristics. As a result, Southern difference is continually being recreated and reinforced (39).

Based on the passage above, for Ayers, the notion of a monolithic South's "otherness" or difference is critical to the rest of the nation's construction of identity. As such, in the U.S. imagination, Florida is acting decidedly "Southern" and that is a conundrum. For sure, geographically, Florida is undeniably a Southern state. Culturally, however, both Floridians and non-Floridians seem to have a variety of opinions on just how "Southern" Florida really is. Anecdotally, I recall an incident that gave me my first experience with this debate. When I was a teaching assistant for an introductory Southern Studies course, the professors co-teaching the course divided the students into groups and asked them to decide which states were part of the U.S. South. Several groups excluded southern Florida or the entirety of Florida from the South. When asked about their decision to exclude Florida or parts of Florida, many students, both from Florida and from other parts of the South, stated that culturally, Florida was just 'different' from the rest of the South. This attitude is not limited to students from a personal anecdote, however. One notable sports and popular culture website, *The Ringer*, published an article in 2017 entitled "Is Florida Part of The South?". Floridian news publications have even published articles discussing Florida's "Southernness" (or lack thereof) compared to other Southern states. For example, the *Miami New Times* published an article in 2015 entitled, "19 Maps That Prove That South Florida is Not Really the South." Articles like the ones published in the *Miami News Times* or on *The Ringer* as well as the attitudes of the students I worked with seem to indicate that there are many people across the United States who have very fixed ideas about what the South is and how "Southernness" in a socio-cultural context should be defined.

Yet, "the South," as a constructed socio-cultural region, has always been just as complex and varied as any other region of the United States. Still, even Tananarive Due, a native Floridian, seemed to also harbor fixed ideas about Florida, particularly South Florida, and its

positionality in relation to other parts of the South. In a 2004 interview with scholar Dianne Glave, Due explained:

I was not a product of the inner-city, and I was not a product of the rural South, so as a black writer, I felt as if I had no voice. I also could not relate to the Southern rural experience-because although I'd been raised in the South, Miami is not like most Southern cities. Miami is more Caribbean than Southern, in many ways. And I knew nothing of rural life. My mother had picked tobacco for a short time as a child for her grandfather, but that experience was very remote by the time I was born (700).

The quote above highlights how Due (and many others) have internalized fixed linkages between Southernness, rurality, and to a certain degree, provinciality. In the interview, Due implies that literary audiences saw working-class, non-Southern urbanity and working-class Southern rurality as the only “authentic” Black American experiences. The passage above also indicates that she believes that most Southern cities have ties to rurality in ways that Miami does not, and thus, she implies that Miami is more cosmopolitan than other, more provincial Southern cities due to its Global South connections. She and many others seemed to have internalized ideas about an exceptional Florida, particularly South Florida.

However, if one chooses to examine Florida, not as an example of exceptionality in the South, but as a more intense embodiment of factors always present in the South, Florida is undeniably Southern. For example, the South as a socio-cultural regional construct has always included culturally diverse urban centers like Atlanta, Georgia; Charleston, South Carolina; Richmond, Virginia; Savannah, Georgia; and New Orleans, Louisiana, among others. Even smaller towns in states typically considered undeniably Southern (i.e. Mississippi) have histories

of immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from countries like Italy, China, Lebanon, Greece, Mexico, and Germany, among others. (MS Encyclopedia) As such, the non-Floridian South is not nearly as provincial as some may believe. It is true that Florida has a long history of significant immigration from the Caribbean and Latin America, particularly from the Bahamas and Cuba (Stolarik 81) However, the U.S. South as a whole has always had significant ties to the Caribbean. For example, in *Final Passages: The Intercolonial Slave Trade of British America 1619-1807*, historian Gregory O'Malley highlights the intra-American slave trade and shows evidence that a large number of enslaved people brought to what would become the U.S. South were imported from the Caribbean. In *This Vast Southern Empire*, historian Matthew Karp highlights how Southern slaveholders and planters were very much invested, financially and otherwise, in the expansion and maintenance of slavery in the Caribbean before and after the abolition of slavery in the United States. Furthermore, after the Haitian Revolution, Louisiana received a large number of refugees, both enslaved and free, from Haiti. (Hall) If we see the South as a space that has always had waves of movement and migration, Florida in general, and South Florida and Miami in particular, are not so exceptional compared to other Southern states. Rather, Florida, and southern Florida in particular, are simply more intense embodiments of qualities already present within the South as a whole.

In other, not-so-positive ways, Florida is not so different compared to other “unquestionably” Southern states. Chattel slavery, an institution heavily associated by the U.S. public with the South, has existed in Florida since the sixteenth century when the Spanish introduced the institution. (Iannelli). Florida would eventually enter the U.S. as a slave state in 1845, would become the third Southern state to secede to the Confederacy, and would remain a slave state until the end of the Civil War (Iannelli). In this way, Florida was the same as other

states in Confederacy who are more easily associated with Southernness like Mississippi and Alabama. Like other Southern states, Florida also has a history of Jim Crow and segregation, even in Miami (Wilkerson). In the article, “Trayvon’s Killing and Florida’s Tragic Past,” journalist Isabel Wilkerson traces Florida’s history of racial violence, including incidents like the 1920 Ocoee massacre; the 1923 Rosewood massacre; the 1934 lynching of Claude Neal; the 1951 murders of a civil rights activist couple; and more. Florida’s history of trauma and racial violence serve as more evidence of the state’s commonality with other places in the South.

If we recognize Florida as a concentrated manifestation of Southern qualities like urbanity and global connection as well as acknowledge its history of trauma and racial violence (another commonality with other Southern spaces), we begin to see Florida as space ripe for upheaval and change. In *My Soul to Keep*, Florida is crucial to the text, because it attracts the main source of the speculative events that unfold in the story: David/Dawit. Regarding his decision to settle in Miami, David/Dawit mused, “He’d chosen a city near his beloved ocean...And Miami, he knew, was large enough to provide him any anonymous delight he might crave” (Due 205). Miami’s large size and connection to the ocean symbolize cosmopolitanism and global connections attracted the speculative in the form of David/Dawit.

### **Post-Soul Southern Potentialities of Black Masculinity**

Many scholars who study women-authored African-American literature in general, and African American speculative fiction in particular, have tended to focus on the role of the Black feminine and female relationships as the speculative sites of connection between the past, present, and future. Some scholars have asserted, “Black women’s literal bodies and Black women’s figurative bodies of literature haunt the literary imagination, rupturing and resisting

Eurocentric tropes and topoi in the coalescing of a horror discourse” (Brook et al. 247). In this quotation, the scholars center Black women as sites of speculative rendering and as facilitators of subversive “haunting.” Concerning the significance of centering the Black feminine and female relationships, literary scholar Gina Wisker has asserted, “Through this dual focus on recuperating and revisioning, recognizing the influence of the spiritual and supernatural in the everyday and in placing center stage the mother and or grandmother as the key nurturing force who enables this development of identity, history and responsibility, these writers also move away from traditional (white, Western) female Gothic” (73). For Wisker, centering Black women in speculative fiction means subverting traditional feminine archetypes and reveals the existence of the spiritual in ordinary circumstances.

Scholars who have chosen to write specifically on the significance of Due’s work have also largely focused either on Jessica’s significance as a central Black female character in a supernatural/horror text or on relationships between female family members i.e. Jessica and Fana, Jessica and David/Dawit’s immortal daughter who is introduced in the series as a more prominent characters in the books that come after *My Soul to Keep* (Wisker 82).

Jessica and other female characters of the *African Immortals* series have rightfully garnered much attention. If one is centering Black women’s experiences in speculative fiction, it is easy to place Jessica at the center of speculative happenings in *My Soul to Keep* as she becomes more and more knowledgeable of her husband David/Dawit’s true origins and power. The exclusively-male immortal Life Brothers even see Jessica and her daughter Kira as threats, because of their potential to be the first female Immortals via their connection to David. Eventually, Jessica and Kira’s bodies become actual forced sites of speculative engagement after David forcefully

performs a ritual on them with the hopes of making them immortal towards the end of the novel, thereby changing the course of the foreseeable future.

However, while not overtly subversive according to traditional Gothic tropes, centering the Black masculine and relationships to the Black masculine in speculative fiction can also reveal deeper layers of meaning. If masculinity is also centered when examining *My Soul to Keep*, readers see how Due utilizes speculative elements through the figure of the Black masculine to connects post-soul readers to the past, to demonstrate how the past affects the present and the future, and to embody and champion a womanist ethic.

In *My Soul to Keep*, the Black masculine as a site of the speculative is most clearly seen with David/Dawit. David Wolde, whose true name is Dawit, is the primary male protagonist/antagonist of *My Soul to Keep*. He is a loving and devoted husband and father to Jessica and their daughter Kira, respectively. He is also an Ethiopian immortal who belongs to an exclusionary brotherhood of male immortals, the Life Brothers, who are based in East Africa. The Life Brothers are a secret group of immortal beings dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge. They have very strict rules regarding their secret rituals for immortality, and they exclude women and girls entirely from becoming immortal or learning their secrets for immortality. Furthermore, they tend to look down on Brothers who form deep attachments to mortals. In the case of David/Dawit, his fellow member and former best friend Mahmoud even hunts him down and threatens to harm him and his family, because he feels that David/Dawit has become too invested in mortals and could reveal the secret of their immortality. David/Dawit, as an Immortal who has been alive for several centuries and who holds knowledge about rituals to gain immortality, is a major force of the speculative. His character's role as a site of the speculative

through the figure of the Black masculine also connects readers of the post-soul era to the past. Due has even stated on her writing of David/Dawit:

In *My Soul to Keep*, I used Dawit's experiences as a slave to drive home some of the aspects of slavery that I think too many of us, blacks included, do not like to think about. The fact is, many more slaves would have tried to escape if not for their personal ties, their families- and that's something we forget. Dawit is a good mouthpiece for that, since the memory of the slavery era is fresh in his mind (Glave 699).

Based on the passage above, it is clear that Due sees David's nature as an immortal being as a perfect vehicle to connect post-soul readers to the past. Through David, Due makes the speculative relevant, because it is used to help contextualize the past in such a way that it can still be felt in the present and future. As a member of a group of immortals dedicated to obtaining knowledge, David/Dawit has travelled extensively over the course of his five centuries of existence. He took many taken lovers and fathered numerous children. However, one partner from David/Dawit's past was particularly resonant in his memory. Aside from Jessica, David/Dawit's most cherished partner was a woman he met during a period of his life where he became part of as well as witness to one of the United States' most tragic institutions: chattel slavery. Whilst visiting the U.S. during the 1830s and 1840s, David/Dawit was captured and sold into slavery in Louisiana and became known as Seth. During his time as an enslaved person, he eventually fell in love with an enslaved woman named Adele, whom his slaveowner arranged to be his "breeding" partner. David/Dawit and Adele had no children together but were deeply in love and even attempted to escape slavery together. After being captured on the run and watching their pursuers rape and lynch Adele, David/Dawit is understandably quite shaken.

David/Dawit, as a representative of the speculative, connects post-soul readers to and contextualizes the past in sobering ways.

In the scenes of the novel when David is having flashbacks to his life as an enslaved person with Adele and when he is recalling all of this to Jessica, readers also finally begin to see how, through David as a speculative site, Due demonstrates how the past also drives the present and the future. The tragic, loving, and fulfilling relationship with the mortal woman Adele is partly what makes the immortal David/Dawit so driven to preserve his happy existence with Jessica and Kira in the present and maintain said happiness for the future as well. David, because of his nature as an immortal being, cannot die, but he can experience the pain of loss and the warmth of love through his attachments to mortals. He knows that he is supposed to exist as an immortal primarily to collect knowledge and observe the world's cycles. However, as a being who has been a witness to and a victim of the pains and losses of the past that he fears will color his present and future realities, David/Dawit is in a constant state of distress and questioning. His past sworn oaths of secrecy to the Brotherhood to never share the gift of immortality are supposed to be firmly upheld. Yet, his feelings of emptiness and loneliness from having lived such a human life with Adele in Louisiana have made him afraid of returning to a sense of desolation and have made him value his current happy home with Jessica and Kira. Due writes:

Yes, the feelings Jessica and Kira awoke in him were intoxicating. He wanted to drink his fill of them, to revel in them, to learn what it was to feel as they did, with life pared down to its emotional simplicities. But he must never forget his limits. He could not expose himself to the emotional ravages he'd suffered with Adele. That period and its circumstances had been too violent, and her death too horrid.

Now, his only enemy was passing years. Living with mortals again, Dawit couldn't help noticing how quickly they aged. Jessica was thinner, her face drawing more tightly at her cheekbones and betraying the life experience of a woman at the end of her twenties, not the beginning. And Kira! Kira, so recently an infant, was nothing like she had been. Already, her head reached the kitchen countertop. ... What if Jessica and Kira never had to age or die? What if they could share his blood? (92).

In the passage above, Due illustrates the intense feelings that Adele, Jessica, and Kira all have inspired in David/Dawit. The passage reveals also that Dawit's desire to never feel the "emotional ravages" he experienced with Adele are so connected to why he is so distressed about his immortality in connection to Jessica and Kira. However, the passage also shows David/Dawit beginning to move away from pure anguish and instead begin thinking about the possibilities of the speculative (i.e. immortality) in helping preserve and influence his present and future realities. Eventually, after moving towards a state of total desperation and near insanity, David/Dawit forcefully performs the Life Brothers' ritual for immortality on Jessica and Kira. Kira, young and relatively weak, ends up dying from the ritual, but Jessica and her and David/Dawit's unborn child both survive and are made immortal. It can be argued that David/Dawit ultimately is unsuccessful in maintaining his current happy family life or preserving it for the future. However, it is clear that David/Dawit as a speculative site of the Black masculine illustrates how Due uses the speculative to contextualize the past and help post-soul readers connect to the past. It also clear that Due also uses the speculative, through the site of the Black masculine, to help showcase how the past affects the present and the potential future.

At this point, I have asserted that Due uses the speculative, through the vehicle of the Black masculine, to demonstrate the how the past drives the present and future. The horror-evoking scene of the novel when David/Dawit forces Jessica and Kira into taking pills that will basically kill them in order to perform the Ritual in hopes of give them immortality are driven by his desire to preserve his present and future realities as a husband and father, roles which provide him with the love and fullness that he deeply craves. However, there is another way to examine David/Dawit's forced speculative engagement: Due using the speculative through the vehicle of the Black masculine to champion womanist ethics. In explicitly disobeying the Brotherhood's rules about sharing the existence of and the secret to immortality with mortals, particularly women, David/Dawit rejects traditional hierarchies. As such, David/Dawit's desire to bring his wife and child into the fold of the Brotherhood, at least through granting them the knowledge and immortality of the Brotherhood, embodies a certain womanist politic. Layli Phillip's womanist interpretation of *nonideological* can be used to explain how David/Dawit's push for his wife and daughter to become immortals and gain the Life Blood, despite the strict restrictions and perils, hides a womanist organizing ethic. According to Phillips, "'Nonideological' refers to the fact that womanism abhors rigid lines of demarcation and tends to function in a decentralized manner... Womanism is not about creating lines of demarcation; rather, it is about building structures of inclusiveness and positive interrelationship from anywhere in the network" (26). According to this quotation, Phillips' interpretation of womanism means a rejection of insider versus outsider dynamics and calls for high levels of inclusion. David/Dawit's choices to disobey the Life Brothers' laws barring women from joining the Brotherhood and sharing the gift of immortality with the rest of the world are reflective of a womanist nonideological ethic. David/Dawit, while initially conflicted with his choice to go against the rules and fierce lines of

insider/outsider demarcation in the Brotherhood, ultimately resists these rigid regulations about whom is worthy to receive the Life Blood and become immortal. David/Dawit's desire to build and maintain community with his wife and daughter through the sharing of knowledge and immortality in the face of the Life Brothers' strict laws and possible retaliation is Due's subtle call for a return to a womanist nonideological ethic. Because Jessica and her unborn daughter, both now immortal, have no and feel no obligation to the same selfish guidelines that the Life Brothers kept surrounding the purpose and secrets of immortality, the potentiality of immortality shifts. The potential for upheaval becomes more readily possible as a nonideological ethic shifts the concentration of power. For Due, inclusiveness and sharing are factors that drive the future into something potentially more radical and liberating than the past ever was.

### **To Believe or Not: The Question of Faith in *My Soul to Keep***

The question of faith is one of the more intriguing concepts brought to the forefront of Due's *My Soul to Keep*. Interestingly, both the speculative and non-speculative elements included in the novel facilitate or have facilitated grappling with faith in a divine presence or entity. Due shines light on the complexities of faith through highlighting the beliefs of various characters throughout the text. Regarding the role of faith, the divine, and religion with Jessica and David/Dawit, Due has stated:

Well, I guess that depends upon whose spiritual test you refer to: There are dual tests in any novel...In some cases, of course, those tests may overlap -but Jessica and Dawit have so much more actual evidence of God's miraculous nature than we do. If I were Jessica, I would be that much more convinced of Christ's divinity, and certainly that much more convinced that there is much more to this

world than we understand. Dawit has the same information-perhaps more- but he has chosen to file it in a place in his consciousness that separates the so-called “miracle” from true evidence of God, much in the way a scientist might assume that there is a scientific explanation, not a divine explanation, for any visible manifestation...The remaining challenge then, is to understand how characters infused with Christ’s blood can behave, sometimes, in a way that is not the least bit Christ-like (Glave 702).

From the passage above, it seems clear that Due believes in the value of a spiritual journey and the process of actualization. For Due, the speculative is an appropriate tool to use to force people to grapple with the idea of belief and showcase the importance of that journey to belief or unbelief. Despite stereotypes of African-Americans, especially Afro-Southerners, as fanatically religious, Due as a post-soul Afro-Southerner uses journeys of faith and belief/unbelief, particularly as they relate to Jessica, to locate yet another dimension of post-soul Afro-Southern reality: Black skepticism and reckoning of faith. Through Jessica’s theological journey, Due highlights the existence of the complexity of belief that are and have been deeply present in Afro-Southern and Afro-American theological thought. Jessica’s journey through belief and faith could be interpreted as a defense of not only the ability of Afro-Southerners to confront incongruences in their conception of the natural and supernatural, but to also validate the very real feelings of discomfort that characterizes these confrontations. Jessica’s journey of faith also becomes reflective of womanist principles, once again illustrating how Due uses the presence of or at least impact of the idea of the speculative or divine to champion liberatory, womanist ethics.

Jessica, the adult female protagonist of the story, in many ways represents the battle of faith and/or religious experiences for many relatively young, adult post-soul Afro-Southerners and African-Americans. At the beginning of the story, readers are introduced to a Jessica who seems firm in her faith as a Christian. However, there are dimensions of complexity within her ideas of how her faith should be practiced and how her loved ones should be able to realize and practice faith. Jessica's close friendship with Peter, another journalist who also works at *Miami Sun News*, is one dimension of her life that illustrates the complexity and flexibility of her faith. Readers eventually learn that Peter is gay, as Due writes, "Only now was Jessica beginning to detect a vague longing in Peter's voice when he spoke of David, a harmless envy. Peter was intensely private, but she'd figured out that he must be gay even before she spotted him walking closely beside a bearded younger man at a Miami Beach festival two years before. He never mentioned a social life, a domestic life, any kind of life" (20). Readers also learn that Jessica was saddened when she believed Peter never felt comfortable enough to discuss his personal life as freely with her as she had done with him. She reflects, "Peter's secrets made Jessica sad. As many times as Peter brought Kira Christmas gifts (and *black* dolls, at that) and joined them in sampling David's honey wine in the backyard, she wondered when she would ever be entertained in Peter's home with his significant other, if he had one. She just didn't know, and she would never ask" (Due 20). However, as a member of a religion that includes many sects and denominations that condemn members of LGBTQIA+ communities and their allies, Jessica is self-aware enough to understand why Peter might have been hesitant to discuss his personal life with her. Still, she feels a tinge of sadness at the idea as she further laments, "Maybe Peter assumed that since she was a Bible toter, she'd fling passages on Sodom and Gomorrah at him. Christians got a bad rap for intolerance., and she just wasn't like that. She worried about her own

conduct, no one else's, and she tried to live a good example if anybody cared to notice. But how could she bring up Peter's personal life if he wouldn't?" (Due 20) In this passage, readers become privy to the flexibility of Jessica's own sense of theology. For Jessica, it seems that the most important part of her faith praxis is simply being a good example of good character, part of which seems to include being accepting and affirming of people irrespective of parts of their identities or belief systems. Her relationship with Peter demonstrates some of the contours of Jessica's theology, and Peter is a significant character for how he functions in driving plot of *My Soul to Keep*. However, Peter is not the only character whom Jessica has a relationship with that demonstrates the contours and complexities of her personal theology.

Jessica's real theological bounds are their most intriguing in theory and praxis when observed and tested through her connection to David/Dawit, who is a force of the speculative. Early on in the story, readers learn that David/Dawit is an atheist. At the start of Jessica and David's relationship, David explained this to her as Due writes:

"I don't believe in God," he announced, snuggling his dampness beside her. It came out of nowhere. Jessica suddenly felt acutely naked; she pulled the sheet across her chest to cover her breasts. "I'm only saying that because you do, because you wear that gold cross around your neck, because I see you say grace before you eat, almost in secret. I'm not vain enough to profess to know absolute truth, but I consider myself an atheist. I've seen too much to believe God has any hand in what goes on in this world. I'm not an antireligion zealot, but I wanted you to know that. In case it matters to you." Jessica swallowed back her confusion. She was disappointed, but his honesty touched her. He was hurting for some reason, but Christ might still find him (34).

Interestingly enough, although he and Jessica are in an interfaith marriage, Jessica seems to be raising their daughter Kira with Christian leanings. Through conversations with her daughter Kira following the death of the family's beloved pet dog Princess, readers observe another example of how David/Dawit helps push the boundaries of Jessica's (as well as Kira's) theology. Due writes:

“ Is Princess in Heaven? Daddy says he didn't know.’ ‘Daddy doesn't believe in Heaven, that's why,’ Jessica said,...’But we do, right?’ Kira nodded, certain.

“Right.”

“Mommy, why did Princess go away?” So Peter had been right after all. She was having her moment, at last, to be a parent when Kira needed her. She gently rubbed Kira's forehead. “Princess died. That's how God calls you home, honey. You have to die to go to Heaven.”

“Daddy won't go to Heaven?” Kira asked, alarmed. Ouch. Did Kira already understand what Jessica, as a Christian feared: That unless David accepted Christ, he would not be saved? That was a tough one to explain. Now was not the time.

“Of course he will. We all will” (29).

Throughout the course of *My Soul to Keep*, David/Dawit continuously expresses disbelief or disinterest in a divine power or higher entity. As author Tananarive Due hinted above in the quotation from an interview, David/Dawit has a great deal of first-hand witness experiences to attest to the belief in the supernatural or divine. For example, when David/Dawit and his former best friend Mahmoud meet Khaldun, the leader of the Life Brothers, back in medieval era Ethiopia, Khaldun tells them, “What can I tell of Christ's blood? There is more than you learned in your Scriptures. There is more than what you find in the Bible or in Muhammad's

Qur'an...Did you know that precious ounces of Christ's blood were stolen from the fresh corpse, drained into a leather pouch? This is true I was there when it was done" (Due 61). Khaldun even explained how he personally underwent the Ritual of Life for the Living Blood, the ritual that the Life Brothers undergo to obtain mortality. During the ritual, as Dawit/David and Mahmoud learn and later experience, once must be taken the brink of death and have the Living Blood poured into their wounds. After David/Dawit successfully completes the ritual, he muses, "How can this be? A man can die and yet live again? And all wounds will heal as though by miracle? An army of such men would rule for eternity! His mouth open with amazement, Dawit can only nod" (Due 64).

In the passage above, readers see that David/Dawit is presented with concrete evidence of a divine being's existence. Khaldun, the leader of the Life Brothers, claims to have seen the Abrahamic religious figure Jesus Christ's blood. Furthermore, David/Dawit as someone who becomes immortal by consuming "Christ's blood," understands the substance's supernatural properties. Yet, in spite of all the evidence gathered from the past, David/Dawit remains firmly disinterested in the idea of a god or divine. This lack of belief or interest in a religion seems to stem a great deal from David/Dawit's experiences as both a mortal and immortal. In fact, he even tells Jessica, "How can I explain? The other Africans here shared my wounds. Does that make sense to you? Just as I could never illustrate to any mortal all I have seen and felt in my lifetime, I could never expect my Life brothers in Lalibela to understand all I have seen and felt here" (Due 205). He was a relatively young man when while living Lalibela, Ethiopia during the sixteenth century when he completed the Ritual to become an immortal. His first love and wife, Mahmoud's sister, died relatively young. He travelled to many places and had many lovers and fathered some children. He fought in wars for Christians and Muslims and became comfortable

in many different spaces and occupations. When he was captured and sold into chattel slavery in 1840s Louisiana, he was forever changed and even more so, when a group of slave catchers gangraped and lynched his enslaved lover Adele in front of him. Even with full knowledge of the existence of some aspects of the supernatural, the realities of pain and suffering experienced while in the natural cannot be easily dismissed or buried. Due writes, “No, Dawit had decided, he would not be a prisoner to Christ or Allah or Satan, or any other of humankind’s imaginary guardians or tormentors. He would not mourn his exclusion from a fabled Heaven. The world was all he knew and ever would know, so he would worship only worldly things” (96). Grappling with these incongruences can certainly amount to a test of or reckoning with the idea of the faith. For Due, the possible existence of the speculative should force us to grapple with the idea of belief, but not necessarily readily accept it.

Jessica also grapples with her beliefs the further she delves into and eventually discovers David/Dawit’s secrets. However, Jessica’s spiritual actualization at the end of her journey of faith and belief embodies a womanist politic in ways that David/Dawit’s faith journey does not. However, Jessica’s journey is still complicated, especially where David/Dawit is concerned. For example, on the family getaway to rural Florida that Dawit/David plans in order to reveal his secrets to Jessica, he “dies” in front of her in order to prove his immortality. Jessica, devastated at what she believes to be her husband’s last moments, begins singing “the most cheerful church song she could think of” to remain strong (Due 193). However, when she realizes that David/Dawit is not dead and he further explains that he is immortal, Jessica is dumbfounded and confused as she is confronted with realities she was not ever expecting to face. Due writes, “Jessica couldn’t even bring herself to pray about it, not at first, because her prayers seemed like empty rituals. David flew in the face of everything she’d known or believed. The only real

answer, the consistent answer, was that David was who he said he was, and she had seen what she had seen” (201-202). Further along in the story, when Jessica realizes that David/Dawit might have killed Peter to protect his secret, she tries to find the possible murder weapon and has another breakthrough as she muses, “Then just when she needed to most, Jessica remembered her Scriptures, the words of Jesus in the Book of Mark. *Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith?* The work of God had unfolded in Jessica’s own hands, which had been soaked in David’s blood from the wound healed by a miracle. She alone had witnessed this...So, despite the slander of others, and her own weakness of mind, she must not let go of her faith. It was all she had” (Due 231). Finally, at the end of the novel, years after Kira has died from David/Dawit’s attempt at the Ritual, Jessica has not only survived, but has given birth to an immortal child named Beatrice. Jessica and her sister Alex left Miami to start up a clinic in southern Africa, using the powerful Living Blood to save lives. After an unexpected run-in with David/Dawit, Jessica allows herself to remember Kira and the pain of losing her first child. She then reflects:

Tonight more than other nights, she would need to stay in her room. And she would pray. What was it that had kept her from praying for so long? Only anger? If the answers weren’t in the Scriptures, maybe she could find them in herself, in her heart. She was a part of something. Her new baby, this remarkable first child of the Living Blood, was part of it too. She could feel the power between them, more than a parent-child bond. It excited her. But she would be lying if she tried to convince herself she wasn’t more afraid than ever. She was. Her life was bigger now. But she was just about ready. That was the most amazing thing of all... Despite the hurts, which went to her soul, Jessica’s spirits soared (Due 346).

At the end of the novel, as seen through the passage above, Jessica's personal sense of theology is not entirely clear, but she has reconciled within herself. Furthermore, Phillip's assertion that in womanism, the concept of the spiritual is connected to the human condition correlates to Jessica's understanding that her newfound Living Blood and immortality should be used to help humanity. She has not fully abandoned Christian values and scriptures, but she seems to have fully accepted that she and her second child are actually immortal. She has no issue seeking comfort in the Bible, but also knows she that can look within herself for the answers she wants and needs. Jessica's complex, and often painful, theological journey throughout *My Soul to Keep* is distinct for the very overt supernatural elements she is forced to confront. Readers see in the passage above a sort of culmination of Jessica's spiritual journey now that she has fully accepted the speculative elements that have allowed her and new baby to be immortal. This acceptance and reconciliation of faith, motivates Jessica to use her "gifts" as an immortal to help impoverished people in need of medical care. If Layli Phillips' renderings of a womanist interpretation of the value of spiritualization are applied, it is easy to see how Jessica's faith/spiritual journey asserts a womanist politic that pushes her to assist other in a sort of liberation, if only through making medical care accessible. On the topic of spiritualization within a womanist context, Phillips has written, "'Spiritualized' refers to the fact that womanism openly acknowledges a spiritual/transcendental realm with which human life, living kind, and the material world are all intertwined. For womanists, this realm is actual and palpable, and the relationship between it and humans is neither abstract nor insignificant to politics" (27). In this quotation, Phillips explains to readers the very real political and social value and potential of spirituality, and her explanation of the "spiritual realm" as inextricably connected to the natural realm very much describes Jessica's resolution of her own existence as well as the world's

embodiment of both divine and natural qualities. Furthermore, Phillip's assertion that in womanism, the concept of the spiritual is connected to the human condition correlates to Jessica's understanding that her newfound Living Blood and immortality should be used to help humanity. In the end, through the presence of the speculative, Jessica's voyage on a journey of belief that culminates in actualization is reflective of a womanist ethic. Due has shown that the speculative can be an important vehicle not only to explore the contours a faith journey, but also to help lead a person on that journey to a process of actualization through the womanist ethic of spiritualization. As such, she provides another example of how the speculative can push forward liberatory ideals. The ups and downs of David/Dawit and Jessica's journeys can be seen as Due's way of reflecting post-soul and even pre-soul Afro-Southern theological reckonings and spiritual lives. Imbuing this idea with Phillips' linkages between womanism and acknowledgement of the spiritual realm, the very acknowledgement of the spiritual alongside the material within Afro-Southern theological tradition is womanist.

### **Conclusion**

As the first text profiled and examined in this thesis, Tananarive Due's *My Soul to Keep* had a lot to prove as an example of female authored, post-soul, Afro-speculative fiction. Due and her work provide a foreshadowing of what is to come in later chapters when looking at the far-reaching potentialities of post-soul Afro-Southern speculative novels. She accomplishes a great deal through *My Soul to Keep*. First, she centers the experiences of post-soul urban Black Floridians, complicates narrow monolithic ideas about what the South can be, and illustrates how Florida's place as a Southern state is related to the novel's speculative elements. Next, she employs speculative elements, through the site of Black masculine, to connect post-soul readers

to complicated pasts and showcase how the past influences the present and the future. Lastly, her novel champions and embodies womanist ethics and reflects the complexity of Afro-Southern theological thought through its connection to speculative elements and the concept of a journey of belief.

## CHAPTER TWO

Even while relegated to the margins in public thought in relation to most issues, the state of Alabama remains ever prominent in the national imagination through its connections to important figures and events in the mainstream Civil Rights Movement. Rosa Parks, Selma, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing and more are powerfully etched within national memory. Beyond its connection to significant moments in civil rights history, Alabama, like many other Southern states, is also prominent in the national imagination as a place that is ‘rooted in the past’ in the worst of ways. Alabama regularly competes with its sister state, Mississippi, for the reputation of being one of the most socially and politically regressive places in the United States. However, the negative press reported is not completely fictive. Legal historian and Alabama native Imani Perry has written about the treatment of predominantly Black communities within the state:

The Black towns in the Black Belt are now dumping grounds—of fantasies and waste. In random assortment through the woods there are abandoned cars rusted to the color of dried blood, and stacks of old unwanted papers. But worst is what comes from out of state. Matter of fact, our nation has turned Uniontown, Alabama, into one of its trash cans, burying it in the refuse of thirty-three states. “Landfill” is too clean a word for what they do. And that’s not all. As part of Uniontown’s sewage system, liquid waste is spewed into the air to land on the

hard Alabama clay earth. The town is showered in shit. Uniontown is 90 percent Black and nearly all poor. A Black and nearly all poor. A fact of modern living is that the least valued carry the heaviest burden. They'll die first, at least that's what the wealthy are banking on. And the dead are killed once again. The graveyard of generations of Black Uniontown residents, since before the Civil War, stands right outside the landfill gates, where descendants worry about the graves being disturbed, despite the corporate promise to treat the departed with respect. It has become harder to honor them. And, in truth, we are all probably somewhat ashamed to face them (4).

Based on Perry's passage, it is clear that many communities in Alabama are still facing issues of inequality and economic and social injustice. To erase them from contemporary narratives of Alabama's equity issues would be harmful. Clearly, it is reductive to assert that Alabama has erased the afterlives of systemic inequality in this contemporary moment.

Still, popular public opinion has often uncritically focused solely on the state's perceived perpetual 'backwards' socio-political climate and situated said climate as almost antithetical to the larger culture and politics of the United States. For example, Alabama received quite a bit attention from the rest of the country in 2017 in the midst of its senatorial election race between candidates Roy Moore and Doug Jones. One of the candidates, Roy Moore, reportedly had connections to White nationalists, Christian nationalists, and neo-Confederates and also allegedly sexually assaulted underaged girls (Lowndes) (Sheffield). Additionally, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, Moore championed regressive anti-LGBT and anti-Muslim views and policies. In spite of Moore's problematic views and history, news outlets seemed surprised when Alabama voters elected Doug Jones over Moore. For example, NBC News and National

Public Radio published articles calling Jones' win over Moore a "stunning upset" (Seitz-Wald) (Taylor). People appeared shocked that Alabama voters would elect the tolerant, scandal-free Jones over the problematic, scandal-ridden Moore. It is almost as if the nation could not believe that Alabamians would want to elect a candidate that symbolized a progressive future rather than one who symbolized a deeply troubled past. In this vein, it seems the nation believes Alabama and other Southern states are in a state of constant confrontation with their histories in ways alien to the rest of the country. Even within literature, the most well-known example of fiction from an Alabama author is Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* follows the story of Scout Finch and her attorney father, Atticus Finch, as he prepares to defend an innocent Black man falsely accused of a crime in Great Depression-era small town Alabama. Of course, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is an important piece of literature, not only within the U.S. South's literary canon, but also within the broader American literary canon. However, its overshadowing of newer, diverse examples of Alabama fiction in the broader public appears to confirm that the United States is most comfortable with an Alabama, and by extension, a South, that is forever shadowed by a specter of the past that is never fully reckoned with. The histories, often rightfully so, are never laid to rest, in life or in fiction.

However, at least in fiction, there is a certain demographic of writers who recognize the importance of reconciling with the past in effective ways in order to offer readers paths of liberation for the present and future. In the wake of Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, new generations of female, post-soul African-American speculative fiction writers began creating work that sought to reckon with the past and how the past could be conceptualized within specific Afro-U.S. frameworks. Even more intriguing, some of these emerging post-soul Afro-speculative authors were from the U.S. South

and were placing their work within the context of post-soul Afro-Southern realities. Phyllis Alesia Perry is an example of one such author who chose to write a post-soul, Afro-Alabamian speculative novel that reckons with the past in a meaningful way in hopes of offering liberatory and progressive frameworks for Afro-Alabamians, Afro-Southerners, and African-Americans to move through the present and to the future. In this chapter, I will examine how Phyllis Alesia Perry grapples with the past and uses confrontation with speculative elements to showcase the necessity of post-soul generations of Afro-Southerners, and by extension, African-Americans, engaging with the power of Southern Black quotidian cultural factors that link them to and help them heal from painful histories. I further assert that Perry also demonstrates how engagement with these Afro-Southern vernacular expressions also showcases a spectrum of Black folk humanity that is critical to working towards and through liberation as well as identity-making and place-making processes, through the womanist theory and praxis I have coined and foregrounded called the “quilt epistemology.” Perry’s call to recognize the power of Afro-Southern vernacular expressions in order to facilitate identity-making and place-making processes that confront painful histories while also showcasing the spectrum and value of Afro-Southern humanity in a post-soul South and world to define and achieve liberation is a powerful rallying cry in her 1998 speculative fiction novel, *Stigmata*.

### **The Necessity of Post-Soul Generations**

After the release of *Stigmata* in 1998, many Black feminist scholars and scholars of African-American women’s speculative fiction immediately saw its rich content as ripe for analysis. Like *My Soul to Keep* in the previous chapter, *Stigmata* featured a Black female protagonist in the contemporary South dealing with speculative elements. Jessica in *My Soul to*

*Keep* dealt with immortals and secret rituals while *Stigmata*'s protagonist Lizzie deals with speculative elements in the form of female ancestral possession or "haunting." However, *Stigmata* was also significantly different in that the Black masculine was not a major site of speculative happenings as it had been in *My Soul to Keep* with the character of David. Rather, *Stigmata*'s speculative elements manifest exclusively through its female characters and their experiences. As such, *Stigmata* inspired a great deal of Black feminist-influenced scholarship. For example, literary scholars Kinitra D. Brooks, Alexis McGee, and Stephanie Schoellman utilized *Stigmata* to posit a theory for critical horror studies called "speculative sankofarration" that was defined as:

Speculative sankofarration clears a space for exploration of composite traumas in the symbolic form of ghosts and hauntings. A Black women's horror discourse grounded in sankofarration effectively liberates Black horror from necessitating its need to derive mainly from the trauma of enslavement, allowing the concept of horror to move toward a more creative and artistic construction and, in the process, providing us with 'an ordered reconstruction of history' that is not linear in nature (Henderson 362). The privileging of sankofarration does not exclude enslavement as a topic for creative horror exploration; rather, it simply rejects the idea of enslavement as the primogenitor of Black horror. Thus horror becomes begotten and beholden to complex and nuanced sources. Speculative sankofarration distills the natural horrors of the Black experience (chattel slavery, Jim Crow police brutality, etc.) and pushes the discourse closer to what horror critic Noel Carroll conceives of as 'art-horror' but within a specifically Black Feminist framework (239).

For these three scholars, speculative sankofarration was a much-needed, *Stigmata*-inspired framework useful for combining interpretation of historical horror and “abstract” horror or speculative elements in order to push forward Black horror texts and scholarship.

Kinitra Brooks as a solo scholar also used *Stigmata* to help develop a concept to use as an analytical tool in African-American and Afro-Caribbean women’s fiction called Black Maternal Inheritance, which she defines as:

Black Maternal Inheritance is the result of a communication process that occurs between a young female novice and at least two foremothers who are endowed with supernatural powers. The Black Maternal Inheritance is built upon Patricia Hill Collins' terms, othermothering, motherwork, and disjunctures, now foundational notions in Black mothering. Othermothering is the idea that a child is mothered by a community far beyond their biological mother. Othermothering accounts for the active participation of grandmothers, aunts, women of the black church, etc. who take the pressure off the sometimes intense relationships between a mother and child. Disjunctures are the small gaps in time and place where motherwork—the often unacknowledged work that mothers are expected to complete without financial gain such as cooking, sewing, preparing lunches...The communication aspect of Black Maternal Inheritance sometimes occurs directly or, at other times, is transmitted through a conduit, often an inanimate object. The process exposes the descendant to an as-yet unacknowledged cosmology (Brooks 18).

For Brooks, *Stigmata* was a significant text, because it provided a plot that was almost entirely Black female-driven, and the speculative elements were focused around the issues of female

inheritance of ancestral trauma and liberation from that trauma. She was able to foreground Black Maternal Inheritance, because *Stigmata* at its core, is a story that centers Afro-Alabamian women and their familial relationships with other women.

*Stigmata* tells the story of an adult African-American woman, Elizabeth “Lizzie” DuBose, who, in 1994, finally returns to her hometown of Tuskegee, located in the ‘Black Belt’ region of Alabama after a long period of being institutionalized in a mental facility in Atlanta, Georgia. The psychiatrist she had been working with and her family all hope and believe that she has been “cured” from her supposed mental illness, but Lizzie knows that she is not and that she was never mentally ill as she states, “I laugh a little, but only on the inside; outwardly, I am drawn up tight, quiet. He is so sure he’s cured my madness...Poor guy. He doesn’t know there is no cure for what I’ve got” (Perry 6). As readers soon come to understand, Lizzie is not mentally ill, at least not in the general understanding of the notion of mental illness. Rather, Lizzie is plagued by vivid memories, visions, and “hauntings” of the physical and psychological experiences of her female ancestors, particularly her grandmother Grace and great-great grandmother Ayo, an African-born formerly enslaved woman. Lizzie’s encounters with these visions and memories are so vivid, in fact, that she actually feels Grace and Ayo are in her body, and as the story continues, readers learn that Lizzie also actually experiences the actual psychological, emotional, and physical pain that her female ancestors endured in her memories and visions of the past. *Stigmata* is told from Lizzie’s point of view, and while primarily set in the 1990s, flips easily between the 1970s, the 1980s, and the 1990s. The story also features diary entries written in the late 1880s and the 1890s by Joy, who is Lizzie’s great-grandmother and Ayo’s daughter. The post-soul era Tuskegee and Johnson Creek, Alabama, are the most constant

settings, but Lizzie's ancestral memories, visions, and possession take readers on a journey to eras and locations that are relevant to the lives of the female ancestors of Lizzie's maternal line.

The visions and memories that Lizzie experiences so vividly that lead her to believe that she is 'possessed' by her female ancestors and is acting as their reincarnation are triggered in 1974 after the death of her great-aunt Mary Nell. Lizzie, who is fourteen years old at the time, inherits a trunk kept from Mary Nell that actually belonged to Grace, who is Mary Nell's sister and Lizzie's grandmother. The trunk contains diary entries that Joy, who is Lizzie's great-grandmother, wrote to record the story of her mother Ayo, Lizzie's great, great-grandmother's life. Grace's trunk also contains a beautiful quilt that readers come to learn tells the story of Ayo's life. While readers slowly learn about Ayo's life through Joy's diary entries, Lizzie first comes into full contact with the experiences of her maternal female ancestor through Grace's story quilt for Ayo. Lizzie's contact with the quilt ushers in the beginning of her vivid speculative experiences with visions, possessions, and memory. She recounts:

The quilt engulfs the twin bed, and I have folded it in half. I am safe underneath the story of my life; the brown woman is safe underneath my palm. On her way to the market...And when I run to catch her, she smiles at me inquiringly, but it isn't Mrs. Dr. DuBose; it is the full-brown woman, her head caressed by bright cloth. I smile back. I love going to market, because my mother is a master dyer. My father sings songs about her, his first wife, his only wife, by the fire at night while I drink in the night. When I wake to the bright Alabama day, there is dust about my feet (Perry 25).

In the passage above, Lizzie initially appears to only be *seeing* her great, great-grandmother Ayo's (also known as Bessie) childhood memories in Africa unfold. However, when Lizzie

actually feels dust on her feet after she wakes up, readers and Lizzie both learn that she is actually *experiencing* her ancestor's memories.

Besides the quilt that facilitates speculative phenomenon, Lizzie also inherits a letter written by Grace addressed to Mary Nell. The contents of the letter are striking. Grace writes:

I also have sent that quilt I was working on when I left. It's finished and Ayo's whole story is set on it. I feel better now it's through. Now Mary please do not show these to my baby girl Sarah...She will ask questions that you cannot answer that I'm not sure I can answer. And I could never burden her with the thought that her mother is crazy. I could not curse her with these things that are happening to me. So save it but not for Sarah. Maybe Sarah will be safe.

I feel that others after us will need to know. Our grands maybe will need to get these things. Please leave these for my granddaughter. I know she ain't here yet. But I have faith that you and Eva will know when the time is right and when it is she will be waiting (Perry 15).

This passage reveals something quite significant about why situating this story in a post-Civil Rights Movement or post-soul era is necessary for the speculative elements to force a confrontation with the past through her ancestral line. As noted earlier, Lizzie inherited Grace's trunk in 1974 at age fourteen. Based on Nelson George's definition of post-soul, Lizzie is a teenager living in the post-soul era. The idea that Sarah, who is Grace's daughter and who was born in 1934, would have been burdened by a mother who would have been perceived as mentally ill by community members is not an unfounded one. In thinking of the actual history that Sarah would have been forced to navigate as a child and young woman living through the Great Depression, World War II, Jim Crow oppression and segregation, and the traditional Civil

Rights Movement, it is logical that Grace believed that Sarah would have been better off without a mother whose vivid visions and ancestral possessions caused her great turmoil that resulted in mental instability. Sarah's life would have been shaped by periods of tremendous repression, economic instability, and social upheaval that could have possibly been more easily navigable with a mother who was mentally stable and otherwise "normal."

Interestingly, Grace predicts subtly and accurately that Lizzie's generation who would not become adults until after the Civil Rights Movement ended would not only be capable of 'inheriting' the past, but would in fact actually *need* to inherit it in ways the previous generation could and did not. Perry, through Grace's letter about family and inheritance, is suggesting that post-soul generations of African-Americans will be unbound by the constraints of steadfast stability and respectability so often associated with the generations of African-Americans who were adults during the Civil Rights Movement. For Perry, these Civil Rights Movement era adults did not have the freedom to truly confront the spiritual, emotional, psychological, and physical wounds accumulated across generations as a result of centuries of oppression in the United States. The Civil Rights Movement-era generation, as Perry subtly asserts through Grace's letter to Mary Nell, also did not have the freedom nor actual need to inherit and practice quotidian traditions like quilting that would help articulate and soothe the accumulated pain. The Civil Rights Movement signaled an enormous shift in the United States' socio-political culture and is always associated with change in the national public memory. As such, African-Americans who became adults just before or during the traditional Civil Rights Movement are likewise associated with an era of tremendous change and breaks from the past. For a generation defined by changes from tradition and the past, Southern, rural Black quotidian traditions in some ways would have been viewed as remnants of a past that had been moved beyond for the

better. African-American demands for socio-political change and class mobility sometimes required a level of conformity to well established respectability politics that required the “shedding” of certain traditions. In an interview with the *Mississippi Quarterly*, Phyllis Perry even states:

It is also part of African-American culture to try and elevate your status by distancing yourself from things that are seen as being low class. Historically, African Americans have done that all the time. It's trying to leave that part of their culture that is being seen by the larger culture as a reason to persecute you. You can't change that you're black, but there are people who try to get as far as they can away from everything else that is considered to be black in order to not be a target of the larger culture. So, Sarah is very typical of a lot of African Americans, especially of that generation, who had a rural past and cultural roots that were closer to their slave past that they try to shed (Duboin 639).

According to Perry's statement, many African-Americans sought to elevate themselves socially by rejecting Afro-Southern cultural markers, because these markers were explicitly linked to the lowest form of Blackness. The implication in the statement is that Blackness, of course, occupied low-class status. However, rural, Southern Blackness, because of its closeness to cultural markers retained from slavery, was the lowest status of Blackness.

However, this shedding away of a past is also not something that Perry appears to view as entirely beneficial. She notes in that same interview with the *Mississippi Quarterly* that:

This whole idea of throwing away everything you are in order to achieve some mythical class status or some sort of power just seems like a really poor bargain and I have witnessed it so much. I grew up in a culture like that, with a lot of class

climbing. It always seemed a little ridiculous, but also damaging to the person who's doing it and to the larger culture as well, because if you're trying to shed that cultural past, if you're trying to bury that very rich cultural expression, American culture as a whole loses (Duboin 639).

For Duboin, class mobility often requires a denial or rejection of vernacular expressions that are often deeply enriching. The desire to acquire status and assimilate to the larger culture erases the beauty and diminishes the value of specific cultural markers in ways that are deeply harmful. Despite the harm however, historically, African-Americans and other marginalized groups have tried to detach themselves from certain vernacular expressions that were explicitly culturally specific.

To further this point, sociologist Zandria Robinson has also observed:

...the South, as an idea, place, and product, spent most of the twentieth-century being escaped from and condemned by African Americans than it spent being praised and warmly remembered. In fact, African Americans participated directly in the burying of the South, deliberately forgetting the region to shut out memories of racism and degradation and the shame of country life, greenness, and backwardness. To be 'New Negroes,' African Americans needed desperately to shed the vestiges of southern life, where the specter of slavery lived on in sharecropping, black codes, and Jim Crow (Robinson 38).

This passage reiterates one of the points Perry made in an earlier passage: rural, Southern Blackness was considered the lowest form of Blackness, and many African-Americans historically have tried desperately to disavow themselves of it. The South, as the birthplace of African-American identity and as the holder of cultural markers deeply tied to slavery and its

afterlives, was seen as something shameful. In the South and in Afro-Southerners, many African-American only saw histories of trauma and cultural markers that kept them labelled second-class citizens. According to Robinson, many people saw the “burying” of the South and the cultural remnants tied to it as the first step to class mobility and social equality with White Americans.

However, these rich cultural expressions are not always or forever buried or lost, in fiction or reality. Lizzie and others who became adults in the post-soul era became the necessary designated inheritors of traditions and stories that might have been doomed to loss as an unintended consequence of the traditional Civil Rights Movement as well as the massive migration of African-Americans out of the rural South into urban centers in the Northeast, Midwest, and on the West Coast. Lizzie’s grandmother Grace, through her own confrontation with the speculative via female ancestral possession, understood that archiving painful histories and the quotidian traditions of rural, Southern Black life that helped delineate and soothe these painful pasts would be of great benefit to Lizzie’s post-soul generation. In a manner not unlike African-Americans during the Reconstruction era that followed the abolition of slavery in the United States and the ending of the U.S. Civil War, African-Americans in the post-Civil Rights Movement or post-soul era have been in a constantly fluctuating process of deciding and articulating what the potentialities of freedom look like and how these potentialities can be realized and achieved in some form or fashion. The acclaimed African-Americanist Bertram D. Ashe notes, “There has been no fundamental, sociocultural paradigm shift akin to the Civil Rights movement to alter the post-soul aesthetic focus”(610). Because there has been no recent massive social upheaval that has affected African-Americans since the Civil Rights Movement, it can be deduced that African-Americans, particularly African-American Southerners are still defining what freedom in the United States can mean and how it should operate in Black

communities. The Civil Rights Movement, while symbolizing a massive step forward for freedom via the law, did not end the struggle to define and achieve freedom in all of its iterations. This struggle to define and actualize freedom is ultimately an endeavor in Black American identity-making and place-making in a nation that is historically built upon axes of anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity.

Perry, through Grace's letter to Mary Nell, signals to the readers that Lizzie's generation and others to come in this post-soul era Alabama as well as the larger South and nation have the opportunity to wrestle with the most valuable and honest expressions of freedom, identity, and liberation through the inheritance of traditions and stories of the past. Scholars of post-soul African-American artistic output would agree in some ways. Noted African-Americanist Mark Anthony Neal writes in *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*:

The generation(s) of black youth born after the early successes of the traditional civil rights movement are in fact divorced from the nostalgia associated with those successes and thus positioned to critically engage the movement's legacy from a state of objectivity that the traditional civil rights leadership is both unwilling and incapable of doing (103).

Lizzie and other post-soul Afro-Southerners and African-Americans, at least according to Neal and Perry, are uniquely positioned and qualified to be able to redefine and reconstruct their own ideas about freedom, identity, and liberation that are not as aggressively shaped by standards of corrective respectability as previous generations.

### **The Power and Value of the Black Southern Quotidian**

Lizzie DuBose and other post-soul generations of African-Americans, both real and fictional, are in positions of privilege to articulate, as Perry does, that Sarah and other African-Americans of the Civil Rights Movement generation made sacrifices that resulted in the potential loss of precious cultural expressions that connect them with and help them to confront and heal from the past. Perry's other real claim though, through Lizzie DuBose's softer and subtle actions and dialogue as well confrontation with the speculative, is that the post-soul generations of African-Americans in the South and beyond ultimately can only successfully begin to engage in honest identity-making, place-making, and liberatory work through reclamation of Afro-Southern vernacular expression. The reclamation and praxis of Southern Black quotidian traditions that delineate and facilitate confrontations with painful pasts and histories and showcase the spectrum of Black folk humanity and liberation praxis can be described through a term I have coined, the "quilt epistemology."

To help expand upon the Afro-Southern quotidian cultural factors as relevant to and even necessary to the processes of post-soul Afro-Southern and African-American liberation through identity-making, and place-making via the "quilt epistemology", it is necessary to understand notable sociologist Clyde Woods' "blues epistemology." Woods' "blues epistemology" was first posited in his landmark work *Developed Arrestment: Race, Power, and Blues in the Mississippi Delta*. In *Development Arrested*, Woods defines the blues epistemology as:

The blues epistemology is a longstanding African American tradition of explaining reality and change. This form of explanation finds its origins in the processes of African American cultural construction within, and resistance to, the antebellum plantation regime. It crystallized during Reconstruction and its subsequent violent overthrow. After two hundred years of censorship and ten

short years of open communication, the resurrected plantation bloc thoroughly demonized all autonomous forms of thought and action for another century. The blues became the channel through which the Reconstruction generation grasped reality in the midst of disbelief, critiqued the plantation regime, and organized against it. The Mississippi Delta is the home of the blues tradition in music, popular culture, and explanation. It is therefore fitting that this popular consciousness is used to interpret both the continuous crisis in the Delta and African American attempts to create a new regional reality based on cultural freedom and economic and social justice (25).

For Woods, Afro-Mississippi Deltans have developed a unique cultural lens of critique for injustice and inequality via their regional tradition of the blues to discuss power dynamics and class inequities that is deeply valuable to processes of liberation and place-making within a regional context. The concepts behind Woods' rendering of the blues epistemology assert Afro-Southern vernacular expressions as critical to liberatory processes to deconstruct fissures of the past to develop more equitable futures. If these concepts are applied to *Stigmata*, the Afro-Southern cultural factors showcased within the text are made that much more powerful and potentially revolutionary.

While drawing from Clyde Woods' blues epistemology, the quilt epistemology is also womanist in nature. In order to better understand its womanist nature, it is helpful to turn to Layli Phillips' interpretation of an important womanist attribute, the vernacular. According to Phillips:

*Vernacular* identifies womanism with 'the everyday' - everyday people and everyday life. The soul of womanism is grassroots identified with the masses of humanity... Womanists view gross differentials in power and resources as highly

problematic because they contribute to dehumanization and interfere with individual and collective well-being. Where they differ from many other critical theorists and social-justice activists is in the trust they place in nonelites to envision and accomplish social-justice ends, inside or outside formal structures like organizations or social movements (24).

Phillips' definition of womanism's vernacular principle is similar to Woods in that it sees the value in the everyday realities of the 'folk.' For both Phillips and Woods, ordinary or working-class people are able to articulate and embody praxes of social justice and liberation.

The remnants of Afro-Southern folk expression that are showcased unapologetically throughout *Stigmata* are very purposeful in their existence. They add to what author Phyllis Perry stated in a previously mentioned *Mississippi Quarterly* interview:

I am inspired by Southern black life, in all of its variations and richness, and it's a segment of black life that I think at one time was paid attention to a lot more than it is now, especially Southern black rural life. My father was an Atlantan, but my mother and her family are from rural Alabama. Our family has been there for many generations. I always felt that those people's lives were very valuable and I wanted to honor the lives and the struggles of those people, especially the women. So, the settings and the sensibilities of those books have a lot to do with that family and that particular kind of black culture. And I would say that in this country, black rural Southern culture is the foundation of all the other variations of black culture that you see in the United States, even though you can say that its foundation is West Africa. But when you talk about what's supposedly black and what's not black, you find it in Southern rural black culture (Duboin 649).

Perry explicitly states in this interview that all Black sub-cultures in the United States can be traced back to rural, Southern Black cultures, that are in turn inheritors of Africanisms directly from West and Central Africa. In establishing the story of *Stigmata* within the particular spaces of Tuskegee and Johnson Creek, Alabama, in the post-Civil Rights Movement or post-soul era, Perry attempts to free herself from certain obligations to talk explicitly about the ups and downs of the Civil Rights Movement and the trauma of White supremacy in prose that centers Whiteness and positions Black people as objects who are the constant, silent recipients of trauma. In describing Tuskegee, Lizzie tells readers:

Tuskegee is the kind of town where people don't change much. Women walk into Lou's House of Beauty every other Saturday and put on the same heads of hair they've worn for decades. Or they sit at home in their kitchens where bootleg beauticians wield hot combs or plastic gloves and tubs of relaxer. Men sit in the sun outside of Mr. Clark's tiny barber shop, waiting their turn. They get their trims and shaves, and frown at the Tuskegee University students who roar through town with dreadlocks flying (Perry 27).

By describing the traits of Tuskegee, a small predominantly Black town in Alabama, Perry highlights the value of the quotidian in identity-making and place-making processes for Black Southerners. Tuskegee, Alabama, through its proximity to Tuskegee University, formerly Tuskegee Institute, a historically Black college established by one of the most influential African-Americans in American history, Booker T. Washington, as a setting inherently demands that Blackness be centered. By establishing Tuskegee as a setting in the post-soul era, Perry has even more freedom to center African-American Southerners in ways that allow for a reckoning with the trauma inflicted upon their communities by white supremacy that do not center

Whiteness and export the pains caused by White supremacy to another source. In this way, Perry's specificity of place and time is necessary for the reclamation of renderings of Black humanity. This "troubling of Blackness" (Ashe 614) also situates Perry in a genealogy of African-American women writers who have chosen to center Black folk humanity, chief among them author and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston. Zandria F. Robinson has written, "Hurston's free-spirited (if measured) upbringing in the all-Black and relatively autonomous town of Eatonville focused her attentions on the power and knowledge of black folk life. As such, she was more likely to see African American life as comprising many problems, interests, and concerns, with race and racism forming just one dimension (38). Furthermore, Robinson asserts that Hurston denounced "the race first position popularized by twentieth-century race men and women, advocating instead for an interpretation of black life that considered black humanity like all other cultural groups of human beings and not as a response to racism but rather as a complex actualized ontology" (38-39). When Perry chooses to place the speculative elements of ancestral reincarnation and possession in a post-Soul Deep South setting in connection to Afro-Southern vernacular expression, she showcases the value and power of Southern Black quotidian cultural markers. Perry is choosing to believe in the value of Black folk humanity.

Perry has championed the power of the Black Southern quotidian to demonstrate the processes of identity-making and place-making in showcasing Black folk humanity. However, she also illustrates how Black Southern quotidian cultural markers, such as diary-writing and quilting, via confrontation with speculative elements, that are passed down to post-soul generations are inextricably linked to reckonings with r painful histories and lead to processes of identity-making and place-making as a course in defining and claiming liberation.

Throughout the course of *Stigmata*, much of Lizzie, Sarah, and Grace's suffering stems from internal or external pressures to shed or run away from the experiences of dreams, visions, memories, possessions, and reincarnation of the ancestors of their maternal female line. In 1980, Lizzie's parents force her to begin receiving psychiatric care for her "mental illness" and physical wounds. Of course, the wounds are actually the "scars" of her physical experiences as Grace and Ayo. Along with her parents forcing Lizzie to receive psychiatric care after she finally tells them about her visions, her mother Sarah hides away Grace's trunk and story quilt. Sarah correctly links these inheritances to Lizzie's visions, possessions, and wounds. However, as a representative character of the Civil Rights Movement era generation of African-Americans, she is initially unable to understand how the burying of Afro-Southern quotidian inheritances like Joy's diary entries and Grace's story quilt for Ayo are necessary for not only delineating the past traumas and histories, but also for healing them and moving beyond them. In particular, quilting as a traditionally female centered and driven Afro-Southern quotidian cultural marker, is especially significant to the work of healing and liberation throughout the text. Lizzie even humorously tells readers in one passage from the text, "The pictures I've designed for that quilt so obviously tell Grace's story that I'm beginning to think Mother is deliberately pretending to be the densest woman on the planet" (Perry 169). After being released from a fourteen year period of psychiatric institutionalization in 1994, Lizzie realizes that she, like Grace before her, must create a story quilt for her grand-mother in order to liberate her family and herself from the clouds of pain and uncertainty experienced in ancestral possession. It is clear that Afro-Southern vernacular expressions like quilting are vital to archiving and healing untold histories.

Regarding the general significance of the occurrence of quilts in African-American women's fiction, scholar Corinne Duboin has written:

As for black female writers, their use of the quilt motif exemplifies what Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown calls a “conscious return to the African American cultural matrix”... It fits in with an alternative “womanist” approach (in terms of aesthetics and politics) that takes into account black female subjectivities, identities, and histories with a common focus on the notions of gender, race, and class (293).

According to Duboin, quilting in African-American literature symbolizes the centering of Black women’s experiences. With Duboin’s highlighting of the role of quilts in female African-American literary traditions, it is no wonder that Perry chooses to incorporate female characters’ quilting into important arcs of the novel.

However, Perry’s interpretation of the quilting motif takes this tradition further as it is employed in a manner similar to Woods’ blues epistemology. Perry’s rendering of what I coin as the “quilt epistemology” as a womanist theory and praxis highlights the significance of and how to begin reckoning with the past through Afro-Southern quotidian cultural markers in order to begin the processes of identity-making and place-making, and importantly, liberation. To further elaborate on the quilt epistemology’s womanist, liberatory potential, I again draw upon Layli Phillips for her delineation of womanist social change methods. Phillips has stated, “Womanist methods of social transformation cohere around the activities of harmonizing and coordinating, balancing, and healing. These methods work in and through relationship, reject violence and aggression but not assertiveness, and readily incorporate ‘everyday’ activities”(27). Womanism recognizes the freeing and healing potential in “everyday” activities like quilting. Therefore, the quilt epistemology as a womanist theory and praxis recognizes the ability of “womanist” Black

Southern vernacular expressions to facilitate identity-making and place-making along with liberation.

This can be most easily understood upon analysis of the actions of the female characters of the novel. For example, Lizzie's great-aunt Eva, who is Grace's sister and from the generation of adult Afro-Southerners who preceded the Civil Rights Movement, also understands the importance of Lizzie confronting ancestral possession and the past through the Southern black quotidian cultural marker of story piece quilting. She even tells Lizzie, recognizing that Grace lives on through her, "I'm telling you, *Grace*...that this time you have to control this thing, these memories, or you're going to be in trouble. And you can't pack your bags and run away from it. You gotta stick here with it" (Perry 118). In order to get a handle on the vivid ancestral possessions and the turmoil they cause, Grace/Lizzie has to take control of the situation by confronting and accepting the reality of it. In this passage, "sticking here" means reconciling with the self and the past in processes of identity-making, place-making, and freedom. Lizzie, and Grace and Ayo through Lizzie, must fully engage in healing-imbued identity-making processes that can only be done by reclaiming spaces and places where memories, visions, and histories of complexity and pain emerge and conflate. The utilization of Southern Black quotidian cultural inheritances to engage in identity-making and place-making processes that meet and heal these traumas of the past will allow all of them to rest and for Sarah, the opportunity be nurtured by and reconciled with her mother and the past. In a final important passage, Lizzie tells her mother that her story quilt for Grace is a "link to the past...That's what this quilt is about. The past. And putting the past aside when we're through" (Perry 228). This passage is Perry's call for the post-soul generations of African-Americans in the South and beyond to wrestle with identity-making and place-making through engaging with Black Southern

quotidian cultural inheritances in order to truly move forward in redefining and achieving liberation in a post-soul region and nation.

### **Conclusion**

Alabama and other Southern states will likely continue to exist in the national public memory of the United States as repositories of painful and oppressive histories, even as the rest of the nation lags in confronting other regional and national histories of trauma and regressive socio-political environments. As gloomy as the idea of the past in various Southern sub-cultures and histories may seem, there are African-American women writers who creatively use speculative fiction situated in the post-Civil Rights Movement South settings in order to wrestle with the notion of “the past” in a post-soul South and world. In *Stigmata*, Phyllis Alesia Perry uses confrontation with speculative elements to deal with the notion of “the past” by showcasing the significance, power and necessity of post-soul generations of African-Americans engaging with traditional Black, Southern quotidian cultural inheritances and markers (especially those that are perceived as female-centered) that link them to and help them heal uncomfortable histories. She also demonstrates how engagement with these Afro-Southern vernacular expressions also illuminates a spectrum of Black folk humanity that is critical to working towards and through liberation as well as identity-making and place-making processes, through the womanist theory and praxis I have coined the “quilt epistemology.” Ultimately, *Stigmata* is an endeavor to help post-soul generations of African-Americans think about the potentialities of freedom and the various ways liberation can be defined and actualized in a post-soul region and world.

### CHAPTER THREE

Jesmyn Ward is perhaps one of the most gifted young U.S. writers to emerge in the last few decades. Her storytelling abilities and appreciation for the relevance of specificity of place have led many to position her as an heir to Toni Morrison and fellow Mississippian, William Faulkner. Ward, a native of DeLisle, Mississippi, is a two-time National Book Award winner for the novels *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, respectively. Virtually all of Ward's fiction is set in a post-Hurricane Katrina era Mississippi Gulf Coast small town called Bois Sauvage, which is based on her own native Mississippi coastal community, DeLisle. Within her general literary fiction, Ward's chosen setting of a rural Mississippi Gulf Coast community in a post-Hurricane Katrina world presents readers with unexpected and varied lenses to view Mississippi with in connection to its past, present and future while also reckoning with life and death. This is even more true for Ward's speculative fiction work, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

*Sing, Unburied, Sing* centers on the story of a thirteen-year old biracial boy named Jojo and his family who live in a post-Katrina Mississippi Gulf Coast community. Jojo and his younger sister Kayla (whose full name is Michaela) are being raised by their Black maternal grandparents River and Philomene, whom they affectionally call Pop and Mam, respectively. Kayla and Jojo's mother, Leonie, has a history of substance abuse problems and partially because of her own grief over losing her brother Given, is not able to be the kind of maternal figure that Jojo and Kayla need in their lives. The children's White father, Michael, is serving

time in Parchman, Mississippi's official state prison, for drug related offenses at the beginning of the novel. When Leonie gets a call from Michael saying that he is being released from prison, she decides to pack up Jojo and Kayla for a family road trip to collect their father from Parchman. During their journey, Ward exposes readers to a number of speculative elements including the ghosts of Richie, a young man who died trying to escape Parchman, and Given, Leonie's brother whom was killed by Michael's cousin. Afro-diasporic spirituality and rituals are also important speculative elements within the text.

*Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a fresh addition to the genealogy of Afro-Southern speculative fiction highlighted within this thesis. Like *My Soul to Keep* and *Stigmata*, the novel focuses on post-soul Black Southern experiences. *Sing, Unburied Sing*, however, is the most contemporary of the works and is the only one featured that was published in the twenty-first century. Tananarive Due and Phyllis Alesia Perry's works, while still distant from Civil Rights Movement-era literature, are not nearly as far away from it as Jesmyn Ward's novel. Interestingly, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is also different from the other works of previous chapters in that its relative youth as a text is mirrored in the youth of the novel's main protagonist: thirteen-year old Jojo. Yet, even with being a very contemporary novel focused on the experiences of contemporary Black Mississippians, the novel is still concerned with the past in ways not unlike *My Soul to Keep* and *Stigmata*. As an example of post-soul Afro-Southern speculative fiction, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* accomplishes several things. First, it calls attention to the existence of Black rural Southerners in a modern context, thus complicating ideas about rurality being a less "authentic" dimension of post-soul twenty-first century, Afro-Southern or African American identity while also illustrating how Mississippi as a setting facilitates the invocation some of the novel's speculative elements. Next, the novel uses the speculative as a

vehicle to demonstrate the liberatory power, potentialities, and necessities of womanist, communitarian organization and engagement. Lastly, the novel critiques superficial examples of social integration that could be and often are used to indicate some sort of shallow, linear social progress.

### **Mississippi in a Post-Soul World**

Moonlight. Magnolias. Joy. Jim Crow. Cotton. Catfish. The forenamed words may not conjure up much meaning individually, but together, the words can all be associated with one infamous place: Mississippi. Mississippi, like the rest of the United States, is a place of complexities and contradictions. Yet, Mississippi is often constructed a bit differently in the U.S. public's imagination. Historian Edward Ayers has asserted that, "The South plays a key role in the nation's self-image: the role of evil tendencies overcome, of mistakes atoned for, of progress yet to be made. Before it can play that role effectively, the South has to be set apart as a distinctive place that carries certain fundamental characteristics. As a result, Southern difference is continually being recreated and reinforced" (Ayers 39). Furthermore, Ayers has noted, "The South has become an object of fun, a sanctioned way to laugh at poverty and backwardness in a way that has been banished for every other group. Pathetically enough, Southerners seem to have a habit of projecting ridicule onto the Southern state next to them, especially if it happens to be a bit poorer" (42). Mississippi, as a part of the South described in Ayers' passages, accordingly has a similar rendering in the national imagination as the rest of the undisputed South. Mississippi's construction differs from the general South in that all of the expectations and roles placed upon the South are amplified for Mississippi. It is fascinating to me the number of people whom I have met from states like Arkansas, Louisiana, Alabama, and Tennessee who have cowered in fear

when I mentioned that I am from Mississippi and have been curious about how I “survived” growing up in such a place. If the South broadly, especially the Deep South, functions as a space that one should fear, then Mississippi in particular appears to function as a space that is meant to terrify.

Yet, this terrifying Mississippi is not entirely fictional by any means. The state has a traumatic history that includes colonialism, Native American forced removal, chattel slavery, Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, lynchings, labor exploitation, debtors’ prisons, and high levels of poverty, among other factors. The nation watched in horror when in 1955, three adult men killed a young Black teenager named Emmett Till whilst the boy was visiting his family in Money, Mississippi. Till’s body was so disfigured upon recovery that his uncle could only identify him by a keepsake passed down from his father (Smith 156). The nation again looked on in despair when in 1967, Robert Kennedy toured the Mississippi Delta to investigate the rampant and oppressive poverty in the region (Seraaj ). Even now, in the contemporary moment, Mississippi has once again become a fixture in national media outlets when in the fall of 2019, ICE arrested nearly seven hundred people during a raid at a chicken plant (Fowler). The nation was shocked again when in January of 2020, various news outlets started reporting on the horrific conditions for inmates imprisoned in the Mississippi State Penitentiary, more commonly known as Parchman. Local and national news outlets have continued to take note of Parchman’s prisoner death-count, and some outlets have reported that even celebrities like rappers Jay-Z and Yo Gotti have decided to sue the Mississippi Department of Corrections over the conditions of Parchman on behalf of several inmates (Gates and Zhu ). Many people experience difficulties while living in the state of Mississippi.

Ward actually uses Mississippi's particular history of violence to facilitate and contextualize certain speculative elements in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Specifically, Ward renders Parchman's legacy of carceral violence in such a way that the trauma associated with Parchman takes the form of the ghost of a former inmate, Richie. Richie is the ghost of a young boy whom Pop used to look after when they were both inmates at Parchman. Richie looked up to Pop as a surrogate paternal figure. Sadly, however, when Richie tried to escape Parchman with an inmate whom had been accused of rape, Pop had to kill Richie in order to protect the young boy from a more gruesome form of murder that the prison guards and warden would have enacted (Ward 255). Pop was devastated by the murder and earlier on in the novel, he never seemed to be able to finish telling the story of Richie's life. For his part, Richie, who was only twelve years old when he was sent to Parchman, was incredibly confused about how he died and desperately wanted an explanation from Pop, so much so that he can become a ghost. Even beyond the impact of the trauma caused by the murder on both parties, Parchman itself, in the text, and in its real embodiment is a breeding ground for suffering. When Pop describes some of his labor and time in Parchman he notes, "I'd worked but never like that... Soon enough my hands thickened up and my feet crusted and bled and I understood that when I was on that line in them fields I had to not think about it... I had to [untether my spirit myself], or being in jail them for them five years would have woulda made me drop in that dirt and die" (Ward 39). According to this passage, being in Parchman almost broke Pop's spirit, and he was forced to engage in very strenuous physical labor. As a state prison, Parchman has a long and unpleasant history in Mississippi. Originally established as a plantation that utilized slave labor, Parchman would go on to become the state's official prison and maintained abusive and exploitative labor practices. Parchman historian David Oshinsky has asserted:

Parchman is the quintessential penal farm, the closest thing to slavery that survived the Civil War. Its story covers the bleak panorama of race and punishment in the darkest corner of the South. It begins in antebellum times, on the Mississippi frontier, through Parchman itself would not be constructed until 1904. And it continues to this day, a story filled with warnings and consequences, and perhaps lessons, for a nation deeply divided, black and white (17).

Parchman, according to Oshinsky, by nature of being the last surviving institution that most aggressively mirrors antebellum slavery, is a symbol of oppression. Violence colors its history, and where violence goes, trauma follows.

Ward uses Mississippi's history with Parchman to render some of the speculative elements of the novel, like the ghost boy Richie, possible, thus showing the importance and necessity of Mississippi's specificity as a setting. Beyond the actual existence of the ghost boy Richie, Ward's use of Mississippi as a setting also directly contributes to a term I have coined, Black Paternal Inheritance. Black Paternal Inheritance is based on scholar Kinitra Brooks' rendering of Black Maternal Inheritance. Brooks coined Black Maternal Inheritance to use in her scholarship about *Stigmata* and defined the term as, "Black Maternal Inheritance is the result of a communication process that occurs between a young female novice and at least two foremothers who are endowed with supernatural powers" (18). Brooks has, of course, focused on the inheritance of speculative qualities via female ancestors. In her contextualization, Jojo could technically be categorized as a subversive, exceptional masculine figure for this trope, because he has inherited his ability to see ghosts and spirits from his mother and grandmother, not his grandfather. However, Black Paternal Inheritance is interested in speculative elements that Jojo has inherited from his grandfather. Other scholars such as Sodam Choi have also been interested

in the masculine genealogy of Jojo's family. (451) However, Choi's interest in Jojo's genealogy and trauma is concerned with her assertion that, "It is through Ward's close attention to the notions of black masculinity and retrieval of (black) humanity that the black South is remembered, recuperated, and historicized." (451) However, Choi does not name her interest in Jojo's inheritance of trauma Black Paternal Inheritance, nor does she examine Jojo's inheritance of trauma from his grandfather as an example of male ancestral inheritance of the supernatural in the way that Kinitra Brooks contends with female ancestral speculative inheritance in Black Maternal Inheritance. As such, Black Paternal Inheritance develops directly out of Brooks' ideas about supernatural inheritance, because Jojo's particular type of engagement with speculative forces is what helps foreground Black Paternal Inheritance. Jojo's first real engagement with the speculative comes about with meeting the ghost of Pop's old mentee, Richie. Jojo's inherited spiritual sensitivity from his mother and grandmother are activated because of this meeting with supernatural elements that are connected to Pop. Richie immediately attaches himself to Jojo, because he almost instantly recognizes the boy as one of Pop's descendants. Because Richie never received closure about his death from Pop, Jojo inherits Richie as a sort of supernatural burden. Richie basically haunts Jojo until he confronts his grandfather about the events surrounding Richie's death. Because Pop and Richie were so unsettled by Richie's death at the time it occurred, the burden to put Richie to rest and banish him fell to Jojo as his Black Paternal Inheritance. Jojo's supernatural burden via Black Paternal Inheritance is a clear example of the way Mississippi's specific history contributes to and is necessary for the enactment of some of speculative elements in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

Still, it must be understood that Mississippi is a complicated space. Many people lead very rich and fulfilling existences in tandem with the difficult and sometimes harsh realities of

the region where they live. Mississippi has cultivated some of the most radical forms of grassroots social, civil, and economic justice activism in the United States. Activists like Fannie Lou Hamer, Medgar Evers, Endesha Mae Holland, Unita Blackwell, Dorie Ladner, and Addie L. Wyatt were all natives of Mississippi. Mississippi writers such as Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, John Grisham, Barry Hannah, Richard Wright, Anne Moody, Kiese Laymon, and Natasha Trethewey, have pushed the sub-field of Southern literature forward in fresh and compelling ways. The state also has a rich musical heritage and has produced musicians like B.B. King, Brandy, Charley Pride, Tammy Wynette, Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, Faith Hill, Denise LaSalle, Marty Stuart, and Big K.R.I.T. The state also has a rich natural heritage with diverse geographical regions; the Delta is not like the Hill Country, and the Piney Woods are not like the Gulf Coast.

Mississippi is a place of “both and,” not either or the other. Author Jesmyn Ward explores this idea of the convolution of reality and emotions connected to living in Mississippi in a piece she penned for *Time* magazine entitled, “My True South: Why I Decided to Return Home.” In the essay, Ward notes:

I breathe. I remain. I remember that Mississippi is not only its ugliness, its treachery, its willful ignorance. It is also my nephew, hurling his body down a waterslide, rocketing to the bottom, joy, running from shoulder to heel. It is my godmother boiling pots and pots of shrimp and pouring them into a children’s pool so we can eat the delicious spicy mess at our family gathering on the pool on the Fourth of July. It is my youngest sister smiling and dancing to Al Green in my godmother’s driveway while the night enfolds like a hand and the insects hiss with summer’s sibilant kiss. It is riding to a convenience store with my childhood

friends with the windows down and the night wind caressing me on my cheekbones, UGK booming from the speakers in answer to the blooming Mississippi night. It is sitting on the porch with my 78-year-old grandmother, my children sandwiched between us on the swing, making idle talk and watching hummingbirds zip through the air beyond her screen as she tells us stories. Flush with joy (5).

In the passage above, Ward paints a picture of the Mississippi that provides her with a sense of community and home, in spite of its difficulties. The excerpt above is useful to readers trying to understand *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and the synthesis of its characters' experiences, especially Jojo's. In Mississippi, Jojo experiences the afterlives and legacies of institutionalized injustices, but he never expresses a desire to leave Mississippi. This might seem confusing to readers, but Jojo's deep familial connections to Pop, Mam, and Michaela make Mississippi "home." For Ward, in both "My True South" and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Mississippi is not a place that modern Black people constantly have to leave. Rather, Ward chooses to render a more nuanced form of Mississippi and center the experiences of working-class, rural Black Southerners living in the twenty-first century. In doing so, she follows in the steps of other post-soul Afro-Southern speculative writers like Phyllis Alesia Perry, who in the previous chapter also chose to center the experiences of modern, non-urban Black Southerners. Both writers push back against popular ideas of modern "authentic" African-American identity being tied to urbanity, especially urbanity that is non-Southern. Various Southern Studies scholars have pointed out the negative impact of the erasure of African-American rural Southerners and their experiences in contemporary articulations of Blackness. Scholar Riche' Richardson has asserted, "If we dismiss black rural southerners, of course we risk recasting the very ideologies that have typically

constituted them as invisible, expendable, and excluded in the African American context. Indeed, it is important to recognize the historical origins of many urban problems among the populations in the rural South” (Richardson 127). For Richardson, erasing rural or small town Black Southerners when discussing issues affecting African-Americans mirrors a culture of erasure of African-Americans in a larger American context. Furthermore, he has also articulated:

Such urban-centered epistemologies of blackness belie the continuing significance of the U.S. South and its rural contexts as factors in shaping black identity.

Furthermore, they obscure the ways in which this impact even goes beyond and at times unsettles the romance that has so often shaped relationships to the region among blacks. They do not take us far beyond binary and exclusionary models of black identity that rely on raced and gendered discourses of authenticity that effectively co-opt and particularize discourses of blackness to the United States.

In failing to recognize the urban as yet another hegemonic script of blackness, they risk negating diaspora scripts of black identity. In the contemporary era, “urban” as a trope of authentic blackness typically goes uninterrogated and sometimes functions in ways akin to how whiteness operates as the invisible and normative sign of American subjectivity. It is necessary to move beyond the binary logic that alternatively scripts “urban” and “rural” subjects as “real” or “authentic” blacks, a critical move that to some extent seems contingent on refashioning and expanding discourses on gender and blackness within diaspora contexts” (Richardson 127).

The passage above indicates the importance of abandoning the task of assigning ‘authenticity’ to any one Black experience in the United States. Richardson urges readers to think what he calls

the “binary” of real versus fake Black American realities and instead recognize the multiplicity of contemporary African-American experiences. With that stated, however, Richardson still notes and takes issue with how rural Afro-Southerners experience erasure and how the rural South is dismissed as an influence on contemporary African-American identity.

Ward, as a native of rural Mississippi, recognizes the rural Afro-Southern communities as a dimension of post-soul African-American identities. However, Ward’s centering of Black rural experiences in a post-soul novel is not just her calling attention to exceptional experiences; rather, Ward, like Phyllis Perry before her, is elevating a certain demographic that is still a significant part of Mississippi’s larger population makeup. For example, according to a 2012 *Race and Ethnicity in Rural America* report presented by the Housing Assistance Council, nearly forty percent of African-Americans in Mississippi lived in rural communities or small towns (HAC 14). With that noted, choosing to focus a speculative story on the experiences of working-class Black rural Southerners is an example of how women-authored post-soul Afro-Southern speculative texts help readers gain more complete understandings of general post-soul African-American realities and geographies by highlighting the significance of particularities in order to expose new or less seen dimensions of identity and place.

By concentrating the text specifically on a Black family from one of Mississippi’s small Gulf communities, Ward also highlights an oft-overlooked aspect of cultural diversity among Afro-Mississippians by calling attention to working-class Black Creole communities. Religion scholar James Mellis, who has focused on *Sing, Unburied, Sing*’s themes of resistance via Afro-diasporic spirituality, has pointed out, “Based upon their [Jojo’s family’s] names (Mam’s given name is Philomene) and some of their worship, readers can surmise that the family is partially of Haitian French or Creole backgrounds” (9). The decision to make Jojo’s family Creole is

reflective of Ward's desire to bring visibility to Black Creoles. In the essay, "Cracking the Code," Ward takes issue with the erasure of Blackness and Black communities from Creole identity. On the topic of erasure she has recalled, "On the local TV station, she [Ward's great-aunt Eunice] watched commentators discuss what it meant to be a proper Creole, women who were darker than her asserting that true Creoles only have Spanish and French ancestry. Theirs was part of an ongoing attempt to write anyone with African or Native American heritage out of the region's history; to erase us from the story of the plantations, the swamps, the bayou..."(Ward ). In this passage, Ward is clearly invested in disrupting the cycle of erasure that Creoles of color experience, because she wants to ensure that their history in the Gulf Coast region is not continually dismissed. By creating a novel focused on a family of Black Mississippi Creoles, Ward, at least in fiction, ensures that Blackness is not something that once again gets extricated from Creole identity.

Mississippi is a complicated place with the potential for lots of joy and pain. It is also a place where post-soul rural Black communities are still very much present. Ward's focus on Mississippi and post-soul rural Afro-Mississippian experiences highlight a very real dimension of contemporary Black realities. Furthermore, Ward's concentration on Afro-Mississippians disrupts the erasure of Black creole communities and demonstrates how Mississippi's specificity of place contributes to the speculative elements within the novel.

### **Womanism and the Speculative**

Womanist ethics are at the heart of Ward's text. She uses speculative elements to help render the necessities and potentialities of womanist principles for post-soul Afro-Mississippians, Afro-Southerners, and other groups of African-Americans.

The primary example of how Ward demonstrates the necessities and potentialities of womanist engagement comes towards the end of novel when Gram is truly on death's bed. Ward uses the speculative elements surrounding Mam's dying moments such as engagement with spirits and the praxis of Afro-diasporic spiritual death rites to help push the family towards a womanist communitarian ideal. Leonie, Michaela, Pop, Jojo, and Given (in the form of a spirit) are all present with her and grappling with her impending passing. Ward writes, "'Say it,' Mama says. She's let her hands fall. 'The litany,' she says again. 'Mama,' I choke, and it's as weak and wanting as a baby's. 'Mommy.' My crying and Mama's entreaties and Michaela's wailing and Given's shouting fill the room like a flood, and it must have been loud outside as it is in here, because Jojo runs in to stand at my elbow and Pop's at the door" (Ward 267). From this point on, readers see the family work together to ensure Mam's safe passing on to the other world; Leonie begins reciting a "litany" of prayers to various Catholic, Vodou Loa (spirits), and Yoruba saints and deities known as Orishas while Jojo and Given (as a spirit) work together to ward off a vengeful Richie, still resentful of how Pop "abandoned" him, as he tries to lead Mam astray from her true peace. Ward writes:

"You got what you came for. Now get," Jojo says. At first I think he's talking to me, but then he's looking through me and up and I know who he's talking to...

"Go," Jojo says. He looks up at where the boy flashed. "Ain't no more stories for you here. Nobody owe you nothing here. Nobody owe you nothing here." He raises a hand to Given, and it is as if Jojo has unlocked and opened a gate, because Given pushes through whatever held him. "You heard my nephew," Given says. "Go Richie" (268).

The scenario described above is the first and only time Jojo gets to interact with his Uncle Given and though the atmosphere is fraught with tension in trying to force Richie away, the two manage to share a sweet moment as Leonie reflects, “‘Uncle.’ Jojo swallows and looks right at Given. Jojo sees him. He recognizes him. He nods, and Given is Given again, only for a breath, because he smiles and there’s a joke again in his dimple. ‘Nephew,’ Given says (Ward 269). In the end, Given is able to peacefully escort Mam away to the other side as Ward writes, “Given’s hand flutters above her face like he is a groom and Mama is a bride and he has pulled the veil from her head and let it fall back so they can look upon each other with love, clear and sweet as the air between them. Mama bucks and goes still. Time floods the room in a storm surge” (269).

Mam’s passing scenario is a moment when a womanist ethic is embodied. Specifically, Mam’s passing scenario is evocative of womanism’s communitarian ethic. According to womanist scholar Layli Phillip, communitarian “refers to the fact that womanism views commonweal as the goal of social change. Commonweal is the state of collective well-being; it is the optimization of well-being for all members of a community. For womanists, community is conceptualized as a series of successively overlapping tiers, beginning with Black women...and ultimately encompassing all of humanity, “the universal level” (26). According to Phillip’s explanation of a womanist communitarian principle, the community and the well-being of community are important, and the idea of community begins with Black women and extends outward. By calling upon speculative forces (Leonie’s litany to the pantheon of spirits) and battling speculative forces (Given and Jojo confronting and banishing Ritchie’s vengeful spirit), the community members push forward the idea of commonweal. The scene is primarily Black woman-driven and centered as Leonie recites the rites she learned from her mother in order to battle and bargain with the pantheon of Afro-diasporic spirits and saints for her mother’s safe

and peaceful passage. The reach is intergenerational and cathartic; Given and Jojo meet and share a tender moment, Leonie is finally able to do something to help her mother, Pop is no longer worried for Mam's safety, and Given and Mam can finally depart peacefully to another spiritual plane. As called for in a womanist ethic, in this passage, community and liberation begin with Black women (Mam and Leonie) and extend outward (Pop, Given, Jojo, and Michaela). The family (which functions as a small community) facilitate the liberation and "healing" of Mam and themselves by helping Mam. Consequently, Mam and Given finally cross over to the other side. Only when engaged in womanist communitarian principles is the family at its strongest. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward uses the speculative as a vehicle to observe the potentialities and necessities of womanist communitarian engagement, with the first and most important unit of community being the family. In doing so, Ward offers an example of a tool post-soul Afro-Mississippians, Afro-Southerners, and generally, African-Americans can utilize as a freedom-making, organizing principle.

### **Superficiality in Race and Relationships**

Official, statewide anti-miscegenation laws have existed in Mississippi since 1865 as part of the state's Black Codes after the end of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery (MDAH 1). In 1967, the United States Supreme Court decided in the landmark case, *Loving v. Virginia*, that all state bans on interracial marriage were unconstitutional. In many cases, however, interracial couples still struggled to receive legal recognition of their unions. For example, one interracial couple in Mississippi consisting of Robert Mills and Berta Linson, a White man and Black woman, had to take legal measures to try and obtain a martial license in 1970 (MDAH 2). Still, even with various legal restrictions in place, non-marital interracial unions, both consensual and

nonconsensual, have existed in Mississippi, the South, and the broader United States since European settlers, various Indigenous peoples, and enslaved Africans made contact and began to interact with each other within various contexts. Regarding African-Americans, some studies, such as one conducted by a team of researchers at McGill University, have found that, many African-Americans have significant, somewhat distant European ancestry stemming primarily from non-consensual unions of enslaved women and slave owners (White). Regarding Euro-Americans, one relatively recent study found that many White Southerners, particularly in states such as South Carolina and Louisiana, have significant and relatively recent sub-Saharan African ancestry most likely stemming from unions during the antebellum era (Desmond-Harris). Many non-Indigenous Southerners, Black and White, also claim have to significant Native ancestry. Yet, throughout of all this mixing and mingling, colonialism, chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and the afterlives of these institutions have carried on and remained. In short, interracial coupling is not necessarily indicative of social or political progress, and sometimes, the coupling may even be reflective of the internalization of negative ideas about one's own identity.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward features an interracial couple, Leonie and Michael, who are Jojo and Kayla's parents. The inclusion of Leonie and Michael's relationship in the novel again speaks to how post-soul Afro Southern women writers are highlighting certain realities of post-soul Afro-Southern and general African American communities; in recent decades more and more Americans have begun entering interracial unions, and the South has even seen a rise in mixed-race or multicultural unions (Fowler). Leonie is Black, and Michael is White, and while they seem to hold a deep level of affection for one another, their relationship is toxic, and drug abuse and grief only further complicate their unhealthy dynamic. In fact, they seem to use each other to try and escape from the more painful realities of their lives. Leonie, in particular, seems

to use Michael and their relationship as a way of handling the grief over her brother Given's murder. Because their union is filled with toxicity, Leonie and Michael are unable to offer healthy parenting to their children, and their union is not indicative of any positive social change in Mississippi. Jojo and Leonie are still racially profiled by law enforcement, Michael's father Big Joseph is adamantly against their union and never accepts his half-Black grandchildren, and life in general is still fairly difficult as working-class people. At the end of the novel, they continue to seek unhealthy refuge in one another, at even greater expense of the relationships with their children, and Ward reminds readers that the afterlives of certain institutions and ideologies do not die easily and history is not necessarily linear. In this way, Ward becomes part of a continuum of post-soul Afro-Southern speculative fiction writers who highlight the complexities of various post-soul racial politics and intergenerational conflict in the South. She uses situations or people who should embody superficial social integration in subversive ways to demonstrate how truly simplistic the notion of linear progress is and how the afterlives of institutions like chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation cannot be washed away.

Michaela and Jojo as biracial children would ideally function as of symbols of racial and social progress in twenty-first century Mississippi; the reality of the story, however, demonstrates that Jojo and Kayla's mixed-race parentage is not a symbol that other characters within the story choose to rally around as indicative of the ability of people of different backgrounds to join together in loving unions. They do not exist as emblems of harmony to shuffle people into a "progressive future."

In fact, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* as a post-soul, Afro-Southern speculative work illustrates how some people, as a result of the afterlives and newer manifestations of various forms of anti-Blackness, are repulsed by and resistant to what children with Black African ancestry may

represent. Michael, Leonie's partner and Jojo and Michaela's father, naively believes that his parents will finally accept his multiracial family once they see their grandchildren and now that he is home from Parchman. Leonie disagrees and takes note of the fact that Michael's parents did not visit him even once while he was in Parchman because of his involvement with Leonie and the children, but Michael remains optimistic, if only for himself. Ward writes: "'They made me baby. And we made the kids. They going to look at Jojo and Michaela and see that,' Michael says. I feel my shoulders beginning to creep down, to relax, to settle (199). It is almost as if Michael thinks the children have an almost speculative quality that will erase his family's deep-seated feelings of anti-Blackness upon seeing them for the first time.

After the family makes it to Michael's parents' home, Michael's mother Maggie is at least cordial to Leonie and the children. Readers find out, somewhat unsurprisingly, that Maggie and Big Joseph, Michael's father, and Jojo and Michaela have never spent any significant amount of time together or even met when Michaela asks Jojo whom they are going to meet and he says, "These new people" (Ward 203). Leonie mentally notes as Jojo says this: "But he doesn't say who they are, and I want to answer her question, want to be her mother, want to say: *Your other grandma or grandpa, your other family, your other Mam and Pop.* But I don't what to say, how to explain, so I say nothing and let Michael answer her questions. But he offers nothing, either...(Ward 203). The implication in this passage is that Leonie and Michael have never explicitly discussed with their children the racial politics behind why their paternal grandparents have never bothered to visit them and is another instance of how Ward subtly critiques the politics of a superficial integration that seems to color the realities of post-soul Afro-Mississippians. Granted, Michaela is still a very young child who may not even be capable of beginning to understand or process the realities of such complex racial dynamics. However,

thirteen-year old Jojo is certainly old enough to beginning interrogating the possible reasons his paternal grandparents are “new people” to him and his sister. While Michael’s mother Maggie finds enough restraint to behave somewhat civilly towards Leonie, Jojo, and Michaela, Michael’s father Big Joseph (whom Jojo is named after) is far from kind or civil. Ward writes:

Big Joseph falls into an armchair and wrenches it to the television. “Figured they’d be rude,” he says. ‘Daddy,’ Michael says. “Won’t even say hello to your mother...Raised by her, what you’d expect Maggie?” “Joseph,” Maggie says...”Hell, they half of her. Part of that boy Riv, too. All bad blood. Fuck the skin.” ...And then I hate Joseph because he’s called my daddy a boy. I wonder what he knows of my daddy, how he could look at Pop and see every line of Pop’s face, every step Pop takes, every word out of Pop’s mouth, and see anything but a man. Pop’s at least twenty years older than Big Joseph; he was a grown man when Big Joseph was pissing his diapers (Ward 207).

In this passage, readers see that Big Joseph is unable or unwilling (or a combination of the two) to see Michaela and Jojo as part of his true family deserving of love and acknowledgement. Jojo and Michaela , despite having Michael as their biological father, are “tainted” with “bad blood” because of Leonie and Pop. Jojo and Michaela do not have some sort of speculative quality as biracial children that makes their identities some magical force that instantly heals racial attitudes. Their Black parentage prevents Big Joseph from being able to fully humanize them as his grandchildren. Even Michael and Maggie’s gentle rebukes are not enough to restrain Big Joseph’s anti-Black disgust and disdain for his descendants. To his credit, Michael takes issue with the way his father treats Leonie and the children, and Leonie even describes in some detail the fight that breaks about the between two: “Goddamit, Daddy!”

Michael says. Quick as he fell into the chair, Big Joseph is up, walking toward us but facing Michael. ‘I told you they don’t belong here. Told you never to sleep with no nigger bitch!’ Michael head-butts Big Joseph. The crack of their skulls ricochets through the air, and Big Joseph’s nose is gushing blood, and then him and Michael are on the floor,... They’re pushing against each other, trying to pin the other down (Ward 208). The visit to Maggie and Big Joseph’s home along with the fight between Michael and Big Joseph is traumatic for Leonie as she is again confronted with the weight of anti-Blackness as it plays out in the afterlives of anti-Black ideologies of yesteryear. However, it is Ward’s depiction of the children, particularly, Jojo as they serve witness to the overt anti-Blackness of their paternal grandfather, that is particularly revealing.

Ward’s clear pushback against the idea of social progress, let alone the potential of a racial paradise, as embodied through the existence of multiracial people, is showcased throughout the visit to Michael’s parents’ home through the way Jojo seems to be processing the events that have and are taking place. Unlike his parents, Jojo does not seem to feel a sense of hope or optimism about his paternal grandparents fully accepting his parents’ union or his and Michaela’s existence. When Michaela asks her older brother if the people they are visiting are Pop and Mam, Jojo simply states, “No. These new people” (Ward 203). In this particular passage, readers see Leonie become flustered and embarrassed over how she, as Michaela’s mother, should be trying to explain the reasons behind why Maggie and Big Joseph are “new people.” Yet, Jojo, who in many ways has been Kayla’s primary nurturer throughout the story, feels no such embarrassment or guilt about not being able to tell Michaela about her paternal grandparents. Jojo, unlike his parents, seems rather keenly aware, in an understated manner, of and *accepts* that he and Michaela’s biracial status is not subversive enough to refute fully

actualized anti-Black ideologies. When he and Michaela meet Maggie for the first time, he offers their names as introductions, but makes no real attempts to engage as Ward writes, “‘Nice to meet you,’ Maggie says, but she does not smile when says it. Jojo doesn’t even nod. Just looks at her and shifts Michaela to his other hip. ‘I’m your grandmother,’ she says...Jojo shrugs and Michaela sticks her middle two fingers in her mouth and sucks hard” (206). Even when Big Joseph begins to insult the children and Leonie, Ward offers the readers no trace of Jojo’s verbal expressions as the scenario manifested. It is telling that Ward decided to use Leonie as the point of view for this passage, because she, despite being dejected, still wants to believe in the idea of Michaela and Jojo’s speculative unifying potential as dictated by Michael. Regarding the beginning of Big Joseph’s anti-Black tirade, Leonie reflects, “I would throw up everything. All of it out: food and bile and stomach and intestines and esophagus, organs all, bones and muscle, until all that was left was skin. And then maybe that could turn inside out, and I wouldn’t be nothing no more” (Ward 207). In this scene, Leonie is forced to confront the truth of her family’s situation. Ward’s silencing of Jojo during the passage can be interpreted as acceptance of a reality that will not be changed. Interestingly, when Leonie’s thoughts about how the visitation with Maggie and Joseph has unfolded shifts from herself to her children, Ward allows readers another glimpse into Jojo’s experience of what has happened. In relation to the outbreak of the fight between Big Joseph and Michael, Leonie muses:

And I still feel sick, and cold, and too small for all this, and part of me wants to go grab Jojo’s hand and pull them out this house and leave them fighting...and I look over at my son and think for sure he’s smiling, for sure he can see how stupid all of it is, but he ain’t looking at them tussling. He’s looking at me, and I see a flash of something I ain’t never seen before. He’s looking at me like I’m a water

moccasin and I just bit him, just sank my teeth into the bone of his ankle, bit it to swelling. Like he would step on my head, crush my skull, stomp me into red mud until I wasn't nothing but bone and skin and mud oozing in my slits. Like he ain't no child of mine. Michaela's climbing her brother, getting higher and higher on him until she's almost sitting on his shoulder, so I do it. I stalk over and grab Jojo's hand's even though I half expect him to yank it away, I pull him toward the door (Ward 208-209).

The passage above gives readers an insight (albeit filtered through Leonie's already somewhat insecure perspective) not only into how big the rift between mother and son is, but also into how deeply Jojo resents the idea that he and Michaela could be used as bargaining tools to help Leonie and Michael gain the full acceptance of Maggie and Big Joseph, despite the deeply embedded anti-Blackness showcased during the visit. Jojo resents that Leonie tried to use him and Michaela as a means to escape legacies of hate and feelings of guilt instead of accepting the reality of what has happened. Jojo and Michaela have only ever known their maternal grandparents, Mam and Pop, as their primary caretakers. Jojo is not interested in being used as a supernatural tool of salvation for his father's parents or as a stepping stone into a "progressive future." After Leonie takes Jojo and Michaela outside to wait in the car for Michael to finish brawling with his father, Ward offers readers another single look into Jojo's perspective and writes, "It's minutes. Or it's hours. Could be days, too, and maybe we slept through the sunrise and sunset, and woke to the night, again and again, and them still rolling and breaking things inside...' We should've left,' Jojo whispers. 'Shut up, 'I say. 'Kayla's still hungry,' Jojo says. I should leave. I should leave Michael to his father. Take my daughter home and feed her, fill her stomach, quiet her whimpering. But I don't" (210). In this passage, Ward demonstrates the subtle

harm that Leonie's preoccupation with Michael, his family, and to some extent, Whiteness, has bred and that has left her unable to be fully present for her children. Jojo, on the other hand, in his own young, wise way has come to understand that he and Michaela are simply not powerful enough nor White enough to force their parents to become healthy caregivers, let alone help their paternal grandparents overcome a deep-rooted sense of prejudice. Jojo recognizes that he and Kayla's identities as biracial children are simply superficial markers of social integration, not full deconstructions of institutionalized and conceptualized manifestations of anti-Blackness.

Given, Leonie's deceased brother and inherited ghost, also serves as a reminder to readers that the afterlives of anti-Black institutions do not fade away easily. Given has been appearing to Leonie as a ghost whenever she gets high, and she feels some level of distress at times by being in a relationship with Michael, who is the cousin of Given's murderer. Given was killed while out hunting with some of his White friends and football teammates. Michael's cousin, who was an acquaintance of many of the young men, was also in attendance. Most of the young men had also been drinking, and Michael's intoxicated cousin ended up feeling resentful towards Given because of his ability to outshoot everyone else. Consequently, the drunken and agitated cousin shot and killed Given. In a chapter written from Leonie's point of view, readers get to see how some of the characters learned about and processed Given's death:

...he [Michael] heard about it once his uncle came to Big Joseph in the middle of the day, the cousin sobering up, a look on his face like he smelled something bad, something like a rat dead on poison driven inside the walls by the winter cold, and the uncle saying: *He shot the nigger. This fucking hothead shot the nigger for beating him.* And then, because Big Joseph [Michael's father] had been sheriff for years: *What we going to do?...* The uncle had slapped his son across the face, once

and twice. *You fucking idiot*, he'd said. *This ain't the old days*. And then his cousin had put his arms up and mumbled: *He was supposed to lose, Pa. Hunting accident*, the lazy-eyed cousin said in court, his good eye fixed on Big Joseph, who sat behind the boy's lawyer, his face still and hard as a dinner plate. But his bad eye roving to Pop and me and Mama, all in a row behind the DA, a DA who agreed to a plea deal that sentenced the cousin to three years in Parchman and two years' probation (Ward 50).

The passage above reveals that although legally, there has been some progress, the afterlives of institutionalized anti-Blackness still influence social attitudes. Michael's cousin seems to deeply resent that Given, a young Black man, could outshoot him and also that Given would not let him win at a shooting contest just to feed his ego. Big Joseph and Michael's uncle do not seem at all disturbed by an innocent young man losing his life over such a petty feeling. Rather, Michael's uncle and Big Joseph seemed more concerned and annoyed about how the cousin would not be able to get off as easily for his crime as previous generations would have for killing a Black man.

Given had been eager to participate in the hunting party with his friends and teammates, but Pop had various misgivings about what he perceived as his son's naivete' about his friends' racial politics. Ward writes of Given's perspective, "Once he told Pop his teammates, White and Black, were like brothers to him. That it was like the team went to war every Friday night, came together and became something more, something greater than themselves...Given ignored Pop" (Ward 48). Regarding Pop's perspective, Ward writes, "Pop looked down at his shoes and spat a brown stream in the dirt. Given said he was going up to the Kill to party with his White teammates, and Pop cautioned him against it: *They look at you and see difference, son. Don't matter what you see. It's about what they do*, Pop had said, and then spit the whole mess of chew

out.” (Ward 48) Unfortunately, Pop was right. The sweet innocence of the feelings of comradeship that Given feels about his teammates and friends and that to some extent, they feel too, is not enough to fully protect him from the cloud of racial baggage that hangs heavily above the community.

Through the rejection of Michaela and Jojo’s biracial Black bodies as the unifying principles and through the tragic story of their Uncle Given’s murder, Ward is very critical of the significance of the representation of social integration as symbolic of linear progress into a better future. Ward reads the use of identities and situations produced by social integration as simply what they are, not as instantaneous or magical catalysts of change that only real, difficult and often painful reckoning can bring forth. She refuses to render all issues facing post-soul, rural working-class Afro-Mississippians as easily solvable through superficial conceptualizations of unity.

### **Conclusion**

As the last novel profiled in this thesis about female-authored, post-soul Afro-Southern speculative fiction, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* adds a fresh touch to the issues the previous chapters’ novels handled. Its relative youth and greater distance from the Civil Rights Movement and its literature does not prevent from the novel from falling into a clear genealogy with *My Soul to Keep* and *Stigmata*. Rather, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* accomplishes many things. First, it calls attention to the existence of Black rural Southerners in a modern context, thus complicating ideas about rurality being a less “authentic” context of post-soul twenty-first century Afro-Southern or African American identity while also showing how Mississippi as a setting facilitates some of the novel’s speculative elements. Next, the novel uses the speculative as a vehicle to demonstrate

the liberatory power, potentialities, and necessities of womanist, communitarian organization and engagement. Lastly, the novel critiques superficial examples of social integration that could be and often are used to indicate some sort of shallow, linear social progress. It is truly a novel for the ages.

## CONCLUSION

The Afrofuturist renaissance in music, literature, film, and other mediums has taken the contemporary world by storm in such a way that will likely persist in the future. The renewed interest, particularly in Black women's speculative literature, is also inspiring to see. Older authors like Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler, Gloria Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara, and others continue to inspire mountains of scholarship. Younger authors like Nnedi Okorafor, Tomi Adeyemi, N.K. Jemisin, Jesmyn Ward, Tananarive Due, and more inspire new conversations and questions to consider. I am forever grateful to have been alive for this current wave of Afrofuturist renaissance, because it was one of the catalysts for me to begin thinking about the potentialities of synthesizing the various influences in my life into something that would hopefully be viewed as a successful academic endeavor. This endeavor, is of course, a thesis about female-authored African-American Southern (or Afro-Southern) speculative fiction based in the post-soul U.S. South. Through this thesis, I argued that these speculative texts embody and champion womanist politics and praxis critical for radical liberation of the Afro-South while addressing the value of Afro-Southern quotidian cultural markers as critical to freedom and identity-making and place-making processes. I suggested they utilized speculative elements to reconcile a complicated past, present, and future as well as provide subversive examples of Black masculinity. I demonstrated how they highlight the complexities and realities of the South and post-soul Afro-Southerners by centering Black Southerners. Finally, I illustrated how they assert

the complexity of Afro-Southern theological thought through questions of faith and doubt surrounding the speculative and critique the use of superficial examples of integration in connection to ideas surrounding linear progress. Ultimately, I wanted my thesis to show how the South is ground zero for limitless capacity for change.

The journey to complete this work has not necessarily been a straightforward one. I have already discussed in depth my path to this thesis topic in my introductory chapter. I felt it was only appropriate and deeply important to recount at least some of this journey to you, dear reader, as a testament to the value of the many different people and books who helped lay the foundation for what would ultimately become this project. As I noted in the introductory chapter, so many different factors have entered my life at various points and influenced me in significant ways that were actually building blocks for what would become my thesis. Folklore, mythologies and spiritual cosmologies. Afro-Southern and Euro-Southern literature. Young adult vampire romance fiction by Charlaine Harris. Young adult dystopian fiction by Suzanne Collins. Adult paranormal mystery-romance. Black feminist social and cultural theorists. Womanism. All of these factors as well as my time as a history major in undergrad; the academics works in Southern Studies courses; Ytasha L. Womack's *Afrofuturism*; and a deep dive into the rich literary landscape of African-American women's speculative fiction and the scholarship surrounding that landscape have all been critical to the navigation of my graduate work's shape and trajectory. The synthesis of all these factors is what facilitated the development of this project, and bouts of introspection have revealed to me just how often the phenomena we think of simply as coincidences often hold the potential for foreshadowing in ways that may be surprising and eventually, perhaps fulfilling.

Within this thesis, I decided to examine three texts: Floridian Tananarive Due's *My Soul to Keep*, Alabamian Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*, and Mississippian Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. In the chapter focusing on Due and *My Soul to Keep*, I examined how the novel highlights several ideas. First, the novel centers the experiences of post-soul urban Black Floridians, complicates narrow monolithic ideas about what the South can be, and illustrates how Florida's place as a Southern state is related to the novel's speculative elements. Next, the novel uses speculative elements, through the site of Black masculine, to connect post-soul readers to complicated pasts and showcase how the past influences the present and the future. Lastly, the novel champions and embodies womanist ethics and reflects the complexity of Afro-Southern theological thought through its connection to speculative elements and the concept of a journey of belief.

In the chapter focusing on Perry and *Stigmata*, I examined how Perry dealt with the notion of "the past" in her speculative novel *Stigmata*, via confrontation with speculative elements. Through these confrontations, Perry showcases the significance and necessity of post-soul generations of African-Americans engaging with traditional Black, Southern quotidian cultural inheritances and markers (especially those that are perceived as female-centered and/or driven) that link them to and help heal painful histories. I also explored how she demonstrates that engagement with these Afro-Southern vernacular expressions also showcases a spectrum of Black folk humanity that is critical to working towards and through liberation as well as identity-making and place-making processes. Throughout this exploration, I also foregrounded a womanist theory and praxis I have coined the "quilt epistemology."

In the chapter focused on Ward and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, I examined how *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, accomplished several things. First, the novel calls attention to the existence of

Black rural Southerners in a modern context, thus complicating ideas about rurality being a less “authentic” facet of post-soul twenty-first century, Afro-Southern or African American identity while also showing how Mississippi as a setting facilitates some of the novel’s speculative elements. Next, the novel uses the speculative as a vehicle to demonstrate the liberatory power, potentialities, and necessities of womanist, communitarian organization and engagement. Lastly, the novel critiques superficial examples of social integration that could be and often are used to indicate some sort of shallow, linear social progress. Throughout my examination, I also foregrounded a new term called “Black Paternal Inheritance.”

In writing these chapters, my hope was that with my thesis, through the mode of speculative fiction, I could help expose the radical promise and potentialities of a complicated post-soul U.S. South. I care about the speculative, and I care about the South. I am a Black Southerner, born and raised in Georgia and Mississippi, two Deep Southern states. Mississippi, the most “aggressively Southern” state in the union depending on who you ask, holds intimate connections for me. Both the maternal and paternal sides of my family have been in Mississippi since the 1830s and 1840s because of the expansion of cotton production, Native American removal, and the domestic slave trade. Mississippi operates as a deeply trauma-filled, ruptured, and “haunted” space. Native American (specifically Choctaw and Chickasaw) removal; chattel slavery; Jim Crow and segregation; sharecropping, the convict-lease system and its enduring legacy at Parchman; enduring racial and economic inequalities; and pervasive homophobia and transphobia all continue to “haunt” Mississippi and the broader U.S. South.

Yet, Mississippi, and the broader U.S. South are also sites of revolutionary promise and liberatory underbellies as seen through the legacies of the some of the most dynamic grassroots racial, economic, and social justice activist movements in the United States. The afterlives of

anti-Indigeneity, anti-Blackness, classism, homophobia, and transphobia exist alongside legacies and modern manifestations of progressive, grassroots racial, economic, and social justice activism as part of the complicated realities of the post-soul U.S. South. Living with these convoluted realities can sometimes be difficult to reconcile, but speculative fiction is helpful for working through these complexities as well as for working towards the possibility of something different. Speculative fiction is a powerful mode with which to engage ideas about how the past, present, and future can be reconciled and shaped. Speculative fiction and disability studies scholar Samantha Schalk has even written:

Speculative fiction allows us to imagine otherwise, to envision an alternative world or future in which what exists now has changed or disappeared and what does not exist now, the like the ability to live on the moon or interact with gods, is suddenly real. For marginalized people, this can mean imagining a future or an alternative space in which relations between currently empowered and disempowered groups are altered or improved. Speculative fiction can also be a space to imagine the worst, to think about what could be if current inequalities and injustices are allowed to continue. Marie Jakober writes that “the great gift of speculative fiction [is that] it makes us think, and specifically makes us think *differently*. It makes us examine things we have never examined. Even better, it makes us *re-imagine* things we thought we knew” [30; original emphasis] (3).

This thesis as an exploration of women’s, post-soul, Afro-Southern speculative fiction has tried to highlight the multiplicity of African-American realities in the post-Civil Rights Movement South. It has also asserted that womanist politics and praxes can still act as liberatory tools within the U.S. South. The speculative fiction novels examined in this work show us that

the South is still ripe for change and holds radical promise and potential for freedom and hope.

The South can be both haunted and hopeful, and liberation still awaits us.

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## VITA

Hilary Word was born in Atlanta, Georgia, and raised in both Georgia and Mississippi. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in History in May 2017 from Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi. She entered the University of Mississippi as a Southern Studies graduate student in the fall of 2018.

As a graduate student at the University of Mississippi, Hilary has held a couple of academia-related positions. For the 2018-2019 academic year, she worked as a teaching assistant for several professors in introductory Southern studies courses. While in this role, she assisted professors with creating, grading, and collecting course assignments in addition to monitoring student attendance. She was also available to students as a resource for assistance with assignments. For the 2019-2020 academic year, Hilary has been working as the Southern studies department's Graduate Writing Fellow. As a Writing Fellow, Hilary has served as a writing assistance resource for students in both graduate and undergraduate Southern studies courses. She specifically assists students with understanding professors' expectations for assignments, clarifying and refining their (students) writing, and becoming accustomed to academic writing culture in general.

During her time at the University of Mississippi, Hilary has been invited and initiated into membership with organizations such as the Gamma Beta Phi and Phi Kappa Phi honor societies. She was also a Southern Studies student representative for the planning committee for the April 2020 Glitterary Festival.