Still Here!: Four Black Female Novelists' Contributions to the Preservation of the History of the African-American Family

An Honors Thesis
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I been scarred and battered.
My hopes the wind done scattered.
    Snow has friz me,
    Sun has baked me,
Looks like between 'em they done
    Tried to make me,
Stop laughin', stop lovin', stop livin', --
    But I don't care!
I'm still here!

    -- Langston Hughes
Human beings from all over the world have qualities in common with all individuals. Two important aspects of life all peoples share have to do with history and family. Most Americans could probably cite, if asked, the basic facts about our nation. They would most likely be able to reconstruct the early development of our country, our nation's involvement in various wars, and those details unique to America. What most white Americans would not want to bring up would be the aspects of life that deal with the humiliation, dehumanization, and exploitation of the black race. White Americans most likely want to forget or overlook the three hundred years that slavery was legalized, the abject poverty that continues to plague the race, and the waves of racism that continue to flow through our society. Those facts, which Americans would choose to overlook, are not forgotten by those families and individuals who have experienced such treatment. The important note here is that the black family has not only survived the years of slavery and beyond, but continues through today with a history and sense of identity despite white efforts to eradicate its roots.

The following is an examination and analysis of the black family and the contributions made by black female novelists to the preservation of Black history. Authors such as Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor have chosen in their respective works Beloved,
Their Eyes Were Watching God, The Color Purple, and The Women of Brewster Place, to portray the black family in a certain historical background. The periods of history that will be discussed include slavery and Reconstruction, post WWI and the Depression, and finally contemporary society. These authors have not only drawn an accurate picture of the black family but they have also included important and exact historical information to give the reader a sense of what it is like growing up black in America.

Important to understanding the black family is understanding the black woman. The twentieth century black woman novelist has fought the nineteenth century portrayal of these women (McDowell 284). The novels of the nineteenth century drew characters that were as close to white as could be (McDowell 285). An important aspect of black self-definition had to do with the lightness or whiteness of skin. The closer a Black could come to being white, the better chance a Black would have at White privileges. This interiorization of racism sets Blacks against one another, and this attitude continues to prevail into the twentieth century. Black women novelists of the later twentieth century recognized the folly and danger of this thought. Contemporary women novelists wanted to overshadow this idealized and tainted version of black women, as well as how she was viewed by her black neighbors (McDowell 287).

The way the black woman is perceived strongly reflects the family since women of all races have yet to find escape from bearing and raising children. Their views of the world, both positive and negative, will be brought into the family.
The most important aspect of this whitened idea of acceptability brings to light the major source of stress for the black family throughout American history. While black women tried to be a "woman" based on White standards, their black male counterparts soon realized that the white male saw no difference when it came to fulfilling their own sexual desires. Some white males saw themselves as limitless when it came to choosing sexual partners. Race, marital status, and even their own relationship to the woman meant absolutely nothing to white slave owners. They had intercourse with the slaves of their choice, and the black men were powerless to stop them (Martin and Martin 94). This problem continued after slavery, into Reconstruction and throughout the history of this country. Black males soon became aware of the fact that white was dominant; it meant white males could have what they wanted without regard for the wrongfulness or even the consequences of their actions.

In 1919, W. E. B. DuBois made a statement with which most Blacks would agree. He noted that Blacks could overlook slavery and forgive Whites for such inhumane treatment; Blacks could forgive Whites for racism and their extremist views. The thing black males would refuse to condone neither in this world nor the world to come, . . .

the white South's wanton and continued and persistent insulting of the black womanhood which it sought and seeks to prostitute for its own lust (Taylor 181).

DuBois' point is very important because this idea can be seen
throughout the works of Morrison, Hurston, Walker, and Naylor. This is an important key to the black family; the male was denied control of the most intimate relationship between two people -- marriage. It is believed that 4% of all slaves had one white male parent. This means that at least 160,000 slave women were sexually molested by their owners (Mintz and Kellogg 74).

Since history of black Americans begins with the slave trade, it seems necessary to discuss this period in great detail, keeping always in mind the immediate stress placed on the black family by the slave owners. Slavery affected three main aspects of black family life. It influenced the roles of males and females, the attitudes of black Americans towards the family, and the structure of the black family. Many of the foundations for the black family, created by slavery, did much to influence and determine the historical development of this institution. Despite the stereotypes of slaves as primitive monkey-people, who were savage and brutal, it is clear that an examination of the black family demonstrates slaves were the humane beings; Whites epitomized their own stereotypes which they had tried to force on Blacks.

The roles of men and women were probably the first aspects of the black family to be altered by slavery. These roles were defined the minute they were dragged off their native soil. The cultures of Africa that were represented by the slaves dictated male dominance, the value of the community, and organization of tribes based on kin (Martin and Martin 93). Male dominance was lost though and equality
pushed because of slavery. Both men and women now had to answer to one white male, and both performed similar kinds of labors (Martin and Martin 94). Naylor stresses this point illustrating how whites saw their female slaves. She writes that black women could not afford the luxury of being "frail damsels given to fainting spells" or "long suffering middle class housewives. Our history decreed that if we tried to pull something like a fainting spell, our heads would hit the floor" (Love and Sex 28). Women could not be weak and refuse to work if they wanted to live; thus, they too labored in the fields. Married men and women both contributed to the upkeep of their household. Men most often performed tasks which included carpentry, tool making, and building traps (Jones 36). It was common for slave owners to make slaves responsible for providing for themselves. They were to gather some of their own rations, care for their sick, build their housing, and bury their dead. Usually within a slave community there was an elderly woman who had knowledge of medicines as well as being a midwife. This person was highly respected by the slaves and achieved a high social status (Martin and Martin 94).

It was impossible for slaves to not be affected by the Whites' perceptions of them; thus, slavery influenced the attitudes Blacks had toward family. Two important perspectives affected by white actions concerned marriage and children. A slave marriage had no legal authority in the United States, and often slaves had little choice in whom they married (Mintz and Kellogg 69). In the 1930's one
former Virginia slave spoke of his recollections of slave marriages. He stated that many times an owner would tell two
slaves they were married if he saw them together too much.
The black women he chose to buy were not ones who were
attractive but ones who appeared healthy and looked strong
and fertile. He recalls the proceedings of a slave marriage
ceremony. The owner would "open de Bible to de first thing
he come to an' read sompin real fast out of it. Den he close
up de Bible an' finish up wid dis verse:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Dat you' wife} \\
\text{Dat you' husban'} \\
\text{I'ce you' marsha} \\
\text{She you' missus} \\
\text{You married} \end{align*}
\]

(Meltzer 32).

Some masters would also marry their slaves while they
stood next to a plow. This demonstrated to the couple and
reminded them that he saw them as workers not as spouses
(Jones 34). Slaves would also use marriage to benefit
themselves. While some have argued that house servants had
an easier life than field workers, documentation from the
house servants shows the "easy life" is a misconception.
Many times mistresses felt extreme hatred or jealousy toward
their women house slaves because most likely they were being
forced into sexual relations with their masters. The
mistress would attack and injure slave women using anything
from knitting needles to meat cleavers. Not only were the
beatings humiliating but the work was as well. House
servants would have to perform the most menial tasks and
remain always available to anyone in the household. These
women would hope to marry a man from the fields because the owners would most likely let them begin working in the fields "to be near her man" (Jones 26-27).

Marriage was a very complicated and highly stressful period of life. Husbands and wives always realized they could be separated any time by the master if he chose to sell one of them. In fact, one-sixth of all slaves marriages were broken apart because of the sale of one of the spouses. Reward posters for runaway slaves often advertised that the slaves had run away in search of their families (Mintz and Kellogg 70). But while marriage was a source of stress, it also was a way to cope. Couples would concentrate and devote their emotional energies to one another even if their physical energies had to be expended in fulfilling the wishes of the master. Courtship was an important and pleasurable aspect of the marriage process. The male was the initiator of the courtship, but both individuals stressed the importance of romantic and physical attraction (Jones 33). Of course, in the eyes of the slave owner the couple's fertility was most important. Gloria Naylor, in the Yale Review, notes that often a trial marriage would be agreed upon by the owner. He would then approve the marriage as long as the couple was able to produce children. To the owner, it was the birth of a child that made the union official. She writes: "The child was the true beginning of a family, and the family was the source of sanity in the slave community" ("Love and Sex" 28).

The second aspect of the family affected by the
institution of slavery; thus, was the process of bearing and raising children. The owners, unknowingly, had directly affected the reproduction of their slaves by standing by the belief that "labor is conducive to health." They would make no change in a woman’s workload once she became pregnant. The difficult labors women had to carry out while pregnant affected their ability to carry the children full term or, if carried until birth, influenced the health of the infant. Many slave infants, because of the overwork their mothers had to endure, died by what is now known as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. This especially affected those children six months and younger. This meant, from the beginning, that slave children were at odds with their environment (Jones 19). At birth the life of a slave child was bleak. Life expectancy for males was 32.6 years and for females 33.6 years. The overwork of their mothers continued to influence their life throughout childhood. The owners would allow slave mothers to come up from the fields to breast feed their infants. Often this was a long journey and combined with the exertion of the day made the mothers milk overheated. This often proved to be unhealthy for the child (Jones 36). These harsh conditions meant that one-third of slave children born would not reach the age of ten. Their expected life span was twelve years younger than their white counterparts; and, by the age of six they could look forward to beginning work for their master (Mintz and Kellogg 72-73).

By 1860 there were 4,000,000 slaves in the United States. This meant there were hundreds of thousands of families who experienced the burdens of slavery. One
necessary function of the black family was to guide survival. The family served as an instrument of education. Survival mechanisms that needed to be taught included folklore, religion, history, morality, and identity (Mintz and Kellogg 68, 71). The slaves depended upon each other for the most basic tasks. Slaves could identify with one another, despite language barriers, because bondage and oppression by the White race was something they all shared (Martin and Martin 95). Slaves taught their children to call adult slaves "aunt" and "uncle" and all younger slaves "brother" and "sister." This helped to create a strong network of community; all slaves were responsible for the care of others. Even though they developed this extended network, the most common structure of the black family was nuclear (Mintz and Kellogg 69). An examination of slave life will show that the masters understood the strength of the black family combined with community support. Masters sought to undermine the authority of slave parents. The masters exercised complete control over slave children. They taught parents not to interfere or question their treatment of slave children. Parents who attempted this faced grave consequences (Mintz and Kellogg 71). All aspects of black family life were in some way touched by slavery. The goal of twentieth century black female novelists then becomes to discuss the affects and aspects of American history that shaped the modern black family. Historian Shelby Foote, author of Shiloh and The Civil War: A Narrative writes:

The novelist and the historian are seeking the same
things: the truth -- not a different truth: the same truth -- only they reach it, or try to reach it, by different routes (Ward 18).

This seems to be the goal of writers Morrison, Hurston, Walker, and Naylor. They all want to arrive at the truth of the black family and they use their fiction to obtain it. Morrison conceived of the idea for *Beloved* in 1973 while compiling a black history scrapbook entitled *The Black Book*. She came across a white minister’s account of a slave woman named Margaret Garner. This mother had planned to kill all of her four children to prevent them from entering slavery. The minister quoted her as saying:

\[I\text{ was as cool as I am now and would much rather kill them at once and thus end their sufferings than have them be taken back to slavery and be murdered by piecemeal (Ward 18).}\]

Morrison must have been deeply moved by this woman’s story and chose to use her experience as the basis for her own story. Many of the conditions of slavery previously discussed are brought out in *Beloved*. Four significant aspects of slave life that Morrison deals with are the black males’ incapability to protect black females, the rigorous life of women slaves who were both pregnant and mothers, the power of elderly women, and the strength of family ties. Morrison shows through the life experiences of her characters Stamp Paid, Sethe, Baby Suggs, and their own network of kin the harsh realities of being black during the period of 1850 to 1873 when the novel begins. All characters contribute to the story and form their own kind of family.
Stamp Paid is a man who helped slaves to freedom by ferrying them across the Ohio River. He is a runaway slave who now helps others also run away. His wife was a victim of exploitation by their white owner's son. The owner gave Vashti a black ribbon with a cameo to wear each time he called for her. Stamp Paid remembers his pain:

Almost a year. We was planting when it started and picking when it stopped. Seemed longer. I should have killed him. She said no, but I should have. I didn't have the patience I got now... (Morrison 232).

Stamp Paid realized that to try to kill this man or even question his actions meant death for him or perhaps the whip for both of them. Stamp Paid believed that he had

Handed her over in the sense that he did not kill anybody, thereby himself, because his wife demanded he stay alive... With that gift he decided that he didn't owe anybody anything (Morrison 184-85).

This is how Stamp Paid got his name. His actual name was Joshua but he so renamed himself; whatever the white man thought Stamp Paid owed him, Stamp Paid, in contrast, saw all debts as paid in full. The debts Stamp Paid incurred were not from his actions but from his skin. When asked by another former slave Paul D, "How much is a nigger supposed to take? Tell me. How much?", Stamp Paid replies, "All he can. All he can" (Morrison 235).

Morrison illustrates the life of a female slave named
Sethe. She is the character based on the real life Margaret Garner. All her years as a slave were spent on the plantation called Sweet Home. As a young wife and mother, she suffered the worst humiliation of her life at the hands of several white young men. One day when she was pregnant with her fourth child, she was attacked, and the young men stole her milk. When she tried to tell the owner's wife, she found herself answering to the whips,

> Bit off a piece of my tongue when they opened up my back. ... I thought, Good God, I'm going to eat myself up. They dug a hole for my stomach so as not to hurt the baby (Morrison 202).

This was a standard practice for beating pregnant slaves. The owners could justify severely injuring the mother as long as the fetus was "protected" (Jones 20). It never occurred to them that the physical condition of the mother directly affected the condition of the fetus. Sethe wanted nothing more from life then to free her children from slavery. Having her milk stolen and being so harshly beaten pushed Sethe to finally decide to escape. When she was discovered in Ohio with her freed mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, she decided to kill her oldest daughter by slicing her throat. She saw it as an act of compassion. Stamp Paid told Paul D, "She ain't crazy. She loves those children. She was trying to outhurt the hurter" (Morrison 234). She had been a victim all her life to the whims of white people. She had a burning desire to control some aspect of her children's future. Sethe wanted it to be how they would die, a death out of compassion not hatred and anger.
Morrison goes on to tell of another woman, Baby Suggs, who was the healer of the slave community. She helped others heal not only physically but emotionally and spiritually as well. Her life spent in slavery had

Busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue; she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart (87).

Baby Suggs was respected by the Blacks in her community. She worked to help them make the most of their lives. She had endured enough pain for all of them; she thought that if she could give others some peace in this life, her life would be worthwhile. She had spent sixty years in slavery and her newly bought freedom, purchased by her son’s labor, was awkward for her. An individual who has never been free must have a difficult time perceiving the concept. Morrison writes: "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (95).

It is Baby Suggs who is responsible for holding the family together. Her son is missing, her daughter-in-law is a runaway as well as responsible for her own daughter’s death, and Sethe’s other three children, one of whom is just an infant, cannot understand her situation. Sethe and Baby Suggs also have loyalties to the men on Sweet Home because they were like brothers and sons. Paul D, Sixo, Halle, and Paul A, all worked together to protect each other. The bond between all these people was love, but love was painful and challenging. It is also something one might not want. Paul D. felt that
You protected yourself and loved small... grass blades, salamanders, spiders, woodpeckers, beetles, a kingdom of ants. Anything bigger would not do. A woman, a child, a brother -- a big love like that would split you wide open...

An individual needed
to get to a place where you could love anything you chose -- not need permission for desire -- well now, that was freedom (Morrison 162).

Freedom was what the slaves prayed for, but when they were finally free they soon discovered that three hundred year-old attitudes do not change overnight. In 1865 at the end of the war the government began the Freedman's Bureau, an attempt by the government to help newly freed slaves and their families obtain jobs and homes. The question of family was complicated because many slaves had several spouses and children by different unions (Martin and Martin 97). For many black families the end of the war meant the absence of husbands and fathers. During the war 14% of black males between 18-45 from Confederate states fought with the Union. Overall, a total of 250,000 black men served the war effort in some capacity (Jones 49). Many women, as a result, were left on their own as heads of families. They had to not only fight the bitterness of a nation but try to keep their families in tact as well (Jones 51).

One real problem of the former slaves was finding a means to support themselves and their families. A common scene in the South was that of land owners driving Blacks from their property and leaving them to face starvation.
Some freed slaves had no choice but to move north. This often did not improve their situation. Northern factory owners would recruit Blacks from the South to come north to provide cheap labor. Blacks were used to bring down the standard of living in some areas and to break unions in others. These activities, of course, increased the friction between Whites and Blacks, and as a result very few unions permitted Blacks to join. Skilled slaves also had a difficult time finding work because the Whites feared the competition (Meltzer 103-04). Despite the migration of Blacks to the northern cities, the majority of freed slaves remained in the Cotton Belt (Jones 52). The lack of both opportunity and employment meant as many people as possible in the black family needed to find some kind of work. Since women had learned various skills as slaves, they were able to help support the household when their husbands had a difficult time finding employment (Naylor, "Love and Sex" 28).

Having control over their own lives was a desire burning within the hearts of freed slaves throughout the South. As slaves they could not own property or have any legal rights. Now as freed individuals they sought to provide for themselves by owning their own land of which they would have full control. During Reconstruction, however, the government did not fulfill its obligations to former slaves. It did not redistribute land efficiently, and, as a result, those who owned vast expanses of land before the war continued to hold possession of these properties afterwards. Former slaves
realized if they were to support themselves they would have to again work for the white man. The freed people returned to what they knew best, planting and cultivating cotton, sugar, tobacco and rice. So their new lives of freedom began as tenant farmers or sharecroppers (Meltzer 126). By 1870, only about 4-8% of freed Blacks own their own farms and land (Jones 63). This fact paved the way for the future of many blacks still today; they would always be tied to the land, still giving their bodies, their spirit, their blood and their hearts as a payment for survival.

The 50-50 system was most common with sharecroppers. It dictated that the family would work the land and be permitted to keep half the crops; in turn, the owners would receive the other 50% of the cultivations as a payment for use of the land and certain provisions and supplies (Jones 61). If black families chose not to become sharecroppers or tenant farmers or could not do so because of lack of opportunity, then they were forced to find seasonal work. Families were obligated to move throughout the South tending to the most recent seasonal crop. They would live out their existence from one harvest time to the next (Jones 55). This did not prove to be lucrative for the slaves. The most common complaint to the Freedmen’s Bureau was that Blacks were not getting their agreed wages, or, for that matter, any compensation for the work they performed. By the time harvest was over, the white owners simply refused to reimburse the families or individuals (Jones 54). White Southerners tried to deny Blacks their new found freedom by following any strategy which seemed to be effective. They
were convinced Blacks would eventually be wiped out as a race because they wholeheartedly believed Blacks lacked all determination and motivation without the omnipresence of a whip (Jones 54).

Once the task of finding employment was fulfilled, the black family underwent some significant changes. Of course, to those Blacks farming the land, children was of the utmost importance. The more children a couple had the more hands they had to help work the farm. The average black family in 1870 in the South has six to seven children (Jones 62). But the real change in family life was with a change in the division of labor between men and women. During this period, as in the times of slavery, black women were once again were victims of white man's dominance and exploitation. It enraged black men to see their black women continually abused, molested, and beaten. Black men wanted their female kin out of reach of direct White contact. Men found themselves denied wages, threatened, or beaten if they questioned white men about their female kin (Jones 59). Whites continued to answer Blacks with force. So black men tried to exercise the small amount of control they had and removed their women from the workforce. Women turned to keeping house and taking care of their families. This also was an attempt by women to demonstrate control over their own family. For the first time they could have authority over their own dominion. While 40% of black women during this time continued to work outside the home, only 1.6% of their white female counterparts also did so. The black female's
attempt to live up to the standard of the white women, not having to work other than within her own home, was seen by Whites as a sign of laziness. Whites viewed this type of Black as living up to their own stereotype of her; they regarded her as shiftless, while their own white women were "ladies" for fulfilling the same role (Jones 58, 59, 61).

No matter what Whites tried to do to Blacks, or what Whites thought of Blacks, Blacks were able to maintain their dignity and pride. Those Blacks who could not bear existence in the rural South moved to the southern cities. Atlanta, Richmond, Montgomery, and Raleigh by 1870 had almost as many Blacks as Whites. Many times the Blacks who moved to the cities were single women supporting, or trying to support, their families. Between 1880-1900, probably 20-25% of the black women living in cities were widows (Jones 73). But black women, whether they had husbands or not, wanted to demonstrate their appreciation of freedom. They bought ribbons, parasols, and dresses. If married, their husbands probably spent a significant portion of their wages on clothes and accessories. Both men and women wanted to own bright colored clothes to contrast with the drab and dull garments of slavery they had worn all their lives. The men were eager to show off that they too had legitimate marriages and wives (Jones 69).

By 1890 the size of Black households began to drop from an average of six to seven children to about four (Jones 73). The basic structure of the nuclear family continued. The 1880 census illustrated that 89.6% of Black households were still headed by men, and 86% of Black households had both
parents present (Jones 336). During this period most females were 1-6 years younger than their husbands, and most families were about equally split between either farming or manual labor (Jones 339). It was illiteracy, though, that kept black families in those labor groups. In 1880, 70% of Blacks were illiterate, improving only to 55% in 1900 (Jones 339). Of those Blacks who were literate, however, most were male; 91% of freed women in the rural South were illiterate and their families poorer than their white neighbors (Jones 61). The household duties and responsibility towards family made it almost impossible for a woman to be educated (Jones 73).

In her novel Beloved, Morrison uses the character of Sethe to bring to light the struggles of black families during Reconstruction. Sethe remembers:

The war had been over four or five years then, but nobody white or black seemed to know it. Odd clusters and strays of Negroes wandered the back roads and cowpaths from Schenactady to Jackson. . . . Some of them were running from family that could not support them, some to family; some were running from dead crops, dead kin, life threats and took-over land. . . . Silent, except for social courtesies, when they met one another they neither described nor asked the sorrow that drove them from one place to another. The Whites didn’t bear speaking on. Everybody knew (Morrison 52-53).

Not only was there a sense of confusion but there was also a sense of remembering the past. In many cases it was not just
a remembering: the past disrupted hearts, minds and souls of those who survived. Morrison uses Sethe’s daughter, Beloved, as a symbol for all the fear and hatred of the past. Beloved is a ghost who unsettled all those lives around her once she returned to Sethe. David Blight in the Journal of American History writes:

the ghost, "Beloved," is a metaphor for all the haunting horror of slavery that the freed people have carried with them into their new lives (1168).

Noting that Beloved was written in 1987 it seems that perhaps Morrison’s ghost is haunting more than just Reconstruction society. Beloved’s spirit continues to creep into the minds of contemporary society because although Blacks have lost the chains of slavery many continue to be bound by poverty, whipped by the enduring white male dominant society and beaten with the club of democracy because majority rules. Beloved still haunts modern souls because the souls of Black folks still aren’t free.

Reconstruction officially ended in 1876 when the last of the Union troops left the South, but the wounds of injustice do not heal quickly. The end of slavery and Reconstruction did not mean the end of Southern White’s bitterness over the loss of their "property." As slaves and now as sharecroppers, the black family endured and continued to adapt to that which White society dictated. The end of WWI marked another period of change for the black family. In the rural South, daily existence became a constant struggle.

In the early 1920’s the Southern farms suffered from soil erosion and the boll weevil, and foreign trade caused
cotton to depreciate in the market (Meltzer 210). Besides the factors affecting the farming conditions, malnutrition and disease also worked to plague the black family. Overpopulation, combined with the harsh economics of the rural areas, meant families had few available resources to provide either adequate medical care or proper nutritional rations. Lack of money meant lack of fresh fruits, milk, and meats. A common disease which developed among rural Blacks as a result of poor eating habits was pellagra, a disorder caused by an inefficient supply of vitamin B. This disease attacked the central nervous system, and women were more susceptible to it than men. Other diseases more serious, however, such as malaria, yellow fever, and typhoid were more controlled, and fewer Blacks were dying because of them (Farley 7, 11, 12). Less life-threatening, but more influential on family size, were venereal diseases. By the time of the Depression, it is estimated that 20% of adult Blacks had some kind of venereal disease. Most common were syphilis and gonorrhea. Syphilis will reduce fertility and cause pregnant women to have still born or aborted fetuses. Gonorrhea can lead to sterility if not properly treated. It is believed these venereal diseases had some influence on the lower birth rates of these decades (Farley 12).

As the economy became worse for Blacks, women again were pushed into the workforce. In 1910 approximately 55% of black females over ten worked outside the home as compared to 19% of white females of the same age. By 1930 the number of black females over ten who worked outside the home was back
down to 40%, but the percentage of women who were married and in the workforce increased to 33% (Taylor 169).

Another aspect of black females not yet mentioned has to do with the disproportionate ratio of females to males. For example in 1870 in New Orleans, there were 150 females from 15-45 for every 65 males in that age bracket. By 1900 in fourteen major cities that had a Black population of over 2,000, there were anywhere between 103 to 143 females for every one hundred males. As a result, because of the trend of black women marrying older black men and the fact that there were more females than males, between 1910 and 1950 widowhood became the major reason for the increase in black female headed households (Taylor 171). There were significant differences in the percent of households headed by females depending on whether the family lived in the South or in the North. In 1930 in the South, 29% of Black households were headed by females and it increased to 31% in 1940. In the North in 1930, 20% of households had female heads and by 1940 the number increased to 25% (Jones 225, 226).

By the time of the Depression, family size had begun to change. The 1930’s marked an all-time low in fertility rates among both Blacks and Whites. Urban black women only had an average of about three children while rural women had an average of five. A main problem with children, of course, for both rural and urban Blacks was the economic strain. It was no longer beneficial to have children. The harsh economy, along with child labor laws, forced many families to try to control family size (Jones 222, 223). Again, in times
of hardships the black family managed to keep its dignity. Black mothers and wives had great pride in trying to keep their households in order and their children clean and well dressed (Jones 163).

It was very important to some Blacks to keep an account of their development in this nation. Neale Hurston plays an important role in the understanding of the black family. She was a brilliant novelist, but her true passion was anthropology. Hurston believed that in order to understand the Black experience one had to understand the role of folklore. She saw folklore as the heart and soul of the Black individual. Hurston saw folk culture in itself as its own form of art, it did not have to be elevated or embellished; it was pure (Naylor, Love and Sex 22).

Hurston was a formally educated woman. She studied English at Howard and started a Ph.D. in folklore and anthropology at Barnard. From 1928-1930 she traveled throughout the South gathering folktales, sermons, work songs, games, blues songs, and voodoo rituals. She expended most of her energies in her childhood home of Eatonville in central Florida. She also went throughout the deep South into Alabama, and Louisiana and spent six months in New Orleans. In 1936-1938 she was a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship which enabled her to study in Haiti and Jamaica (Hemenway 39-40). Her research was important because she concentrated on the "private and domestic" and emphasized "folk wisdom." Her colleagues, on the other hand, pursued the scientific and concrete (Butler-Evans 42). Her work also
differed drastically from that of other folklore scholars. Newbell Niles Puckett, for example, wrote on the "Laziness, Humor and Sexuality" of rural Blacks. Her methods of collecting were very non-scientific. She believed the best way to understand certain behaviors was to examine the people's oral traditions of their folklore (Hemenway 40-41).

Hurston had some of her own definitions of folklore. The following two are from her essay "Go Gator and Muddy the Water," written probably in October of 1938. She describes folklore as,

the boiled down juices of human living and when one phase of it passes another begins which shall in turn give away before a successor (41).

From another perspective she writes "Folklore is the arts of the people before they find out that there is such a thing as art" (42). By the end of Hurston's life, she was responsible for writing more books than any other black American woman (Hemenway 39). Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God follows the life of Janie Crawford. She is an individual searching for love and wanting to find fulfillment in marriage. This novel describes the experiences of several generations of Blacks. In order to understand the function of the family, Hurston examines black perspectives on love, marriage, kin, and community. The characters of Nanny, Janie, Pheoby, and Tea Cake all contribute to the overall comprehension of the experiences of a typical Southern Black in the 1920's and early 1930's. Hurston is able realistically to recreate the struggles of this group of people. At the same time she herself was representational of
this group because, in a way, she was one of them as well.

One of the primary themes of *There Eyes Were Watching God* is the power marriage has to affect an individual's overall perception of the world. The character of Nanny is an historical reference for other characters. She reflects on the previous treatment of Blacks. She is Janie's maternal grandmother and works to reconstruct the missing pieces of Janie's past. Nanny herself was a mistress to her owner. She also suffered the consequences; shortly after giving birth to Janie's mother, the mistress of the house inquires about the baby. Nanny tells Janie the story:

"Nigger, whut's yo' baby doin' wid gray eyes and yaller hair?' She begin tuh slap mah jaw ever which a 'way. . . . But then she kapt on astin me how come mah baby look white. . . . So ah told her, 'Auh don't know nothin' but what Ah'm told tuh do, 'cause ah ain't nothin' but uh nigger and uh slave' (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 33-34).

While Nanny thought her answer would calm her mistress' storm of jealousy, she discovered the next morning at the whipping post it had not.

Nanny's own life experiences with men caused her to draw her own conclusions about marriage later on in life: "De nigger woman in de mule uh de world so fuh as ah can see" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 9). Despite all of Nanny's pessimism, however, she represents a positive image. She is representative of the developing trend in black families toward female headed households. She has a deep
understanding of black females in general. She tells Janie:

You know, honey, us colored folks is branches
without roots and that makes things come round in
queer ways (Hurston, Their Eyes 31).

The characters of Janie and Pheoby are much different
from Nanny, as well as being quite different from each other.
Janie represents independence and strength of the female
spirit; in that sense she is similar to her grandmother.
Pheoby, on the other hand, represents community and gossip.
In the opening of the story Janie has just returned from the
Everglades where she lived with her third husband, Tea Cake.
The neighbors, of course, are curious about where she has
been and what has happened to her, so they send over Janie’s
friend, Pheoby, to find out her situation. At this point,
they were jealous because Janie is looking and acting younger
than they think she actually is. Through their jealousy,
there is a sense of concern pointing to the fact that they do
care even if they are being selfish. As Pheoby seems
symbolic of community, Janie’s treatment of her reflects the
ultimate feeling towards her neighbors. The novel is a
retelling of Janie’s life, by Janie to Pheoby. By retelling
it, she is somehow trying to make sense of it herself. She
tells Pheoby:

Pheoby, we been kissin’ friends for twenty years,
so ah depend on you for a good thought and ah’m
talking to you from dat standpoint.

Janie puts her trust in Pheoby, and by this act she seems to
trust the neighborhood with her life’s story.

Janie spends her life looking for happiness and love.
Her first marriage was by arrangement. She was so miserable she ended up leaving to be with another man, Joe Starks, who only slightly helped to bring her happiness. Once he died, she married another man, who proved to fulfill her life's ambitions. His name was Tea Cake, and he made Janie happier than she had ever been. Janie's pattern of life, except for her situation with her first husband shows the common attitude of black women towards marriage. Divorce and desertion are rare acts of a black woman. In most cases, black women will remain in a marriage despite the conditions, for faithfulness is extremely important. In most cases the husband had to desert the wife or die in order to end the relationship (Naylor, "Love and Sex" 29). As it was in the times of slavery, the family placed a high value on faithfulness and sexual morality. Young women were not shunned by other slaves for having children before marriage because proving their fertility at a young age to a slave owner was the sign of a good investment. To the family it meant that most likely she would not be sold away from her kin. At the same time women were expected to have one husband and to have all of her children by him (Mintz and Kellogg 75). In the end of the novel, Janie demonstrates her absolute devotion to her husband even in the worst of situations. Tea Cake had been bitten by a rabid dog and as a result suffered from all the fatal affects of the disease. At the end of his life, after being bitten only three weeks earlier, he tries to kill Janie. The disease drove all rational thought from his mind. Out of mercy she shoots him,
wounding and killing him. Hurston writes:

Janie held his head tightly to her breast and wept and thanked him wordlessly for giving her the chance for loving service. She had to hug him tight for soon he would be gone, and she had to tell him for the last time. (Hurston, Their Eyes 273-74).

Janie and Tea Cake shared and maintained a loving compassionate relationship during their time together. They had their share of jealous quarrels and impatient, insecure thoughts, but they were realistic characters. They were people whom, perhaps, Hurston knew or lived with or heard of; they were two black people who demonstrated to all that a caring relationship between a black man and woman is possible. What Hurston contributed most perhaps to the understanding of the black family is that she provided both realistic and positive examples of Black life. Hurston knew people because her life's passion was to understand them and celebrate their spirit. Hurston knew, perhaps better than anyone, that the Blacks as a family and as individuals were a reverse image of the primitive and bestial picture that Whites had painted for them.

While Hurston lived during the time period of which she writes about, Alice Walker, on the other hand, is like Morrison in the fact they are both contemporaries. It is Walker though who is responsible for compiling facts about Hurston’s life and reintroducing her to modern readers. One the back cover of the Illini Books 1978 edition of Their Eyes Were Watching God, Walker writes, "There is no
book more important to me than this one." But Hurston is more to Walker than just another female novelist; she upholds the aspect of Black culture that deals with folklore. Walker states that for a black female novelist it is vital to know "the oral stories told by her female ancestors" (McDowell 242).

In *The Color Purple*, Walker illustrates not only the life of the black family in America but also compares it to the life in Africa during the same period of history. *The Color Purple* is set in the rural South during the Depression. Life during this time was not much different for these black families than it had been during the previous decade; it was those black families in the urban areas who truly saw change with the onset of the Depression. By the time of the Depression, approximately three-fourths of the Black population resided in the South. This meant that 3,000,000 Blacks now lived in the North. The most drastic problem then that Blacks had to face once in the North was finding adequate housing. A shortage of available housing meant a renovation of the already established residences. A typical building of a northern city was reconstructed to house three hundred families instead of sixty. The units became known as kitchenettes. They contained an icebox, hot plate, and bed.

Packing more families into a building also meant families had to share facilities. It was common for a single bathroom to be expected to accommodate six separate families (Mintz and Kellogg 141-42). Black writer Richard Wright and
his family were included in those 3,000,000 Blacks who, by the time of the Depression, lived in the North. His family moved to Chicago, and he tells his story of city life.

There are so many people. For the first time in our lives we feel human bodies, strangers whose lives and thoughts are unknown to us, pressing always close about us. We cannot see or know a man because of the thousands upon thousands of men.

. . . No longer do our lives depend upon the soil, the sun, the rain or the wind; we live by the grace of jobs and the brutal logic of jobs. . . . The kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without a trial. The new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks. (Wright 181, 182, 183).

It is clear though that the Southern black family dealt with different sets of circumstances during the Depression. The Color Purple spans several decades following the life of Celie and her own attempts to find and know her "true" family and self.

The Color Purple is an epistolary novel. Her letters begin when she is a young girl, and she addresses them to God. Through the course of her life, though, she starts addressing her letters to her sister, Nettie. Walker, like Hurston, illustrates the new movement in the family toward female headed households. She also incorporated folklore. She discusses local traditions and contemporary trends such as the importance of blues and the direct influence of
Africa. Walker also addressed the common daily struggles that especially faced the black women of the time.

One major issue in Walker's work is the strength of the family. Walker portrays the extended family, which was becoming the foundation for the structure of the modern family. During the Depression, the black family structure underwent a radical change; there was a large increase of Black extended families. Just as in slave times, in time of real need, Blacks joined together in order to survive. Blacks more than Whites could depend on outside help in order to maintain existence. Friends, neighbors, and kin all contributed to the maintenance of a given household. Mothers became especially important to their daughters because they were the ones who helped care for the children when they could not be there (Jones 228).

The most significant community-supported activity was the preparation of food. Women joined together to can, gather food, and quilt. They were the ones who planned the celebrations of family events, often times these centered around their church. Preparation of food became the spiritual symbol of working together to survive (Jones 229-230).

Family for Celie was always centered around her sister, Nettie. Nettie was a source of strength and a symbol of love even when they could not be together. Celie begins her own family at an early age at the hands of her stepfather. He continually raped her and the result was two children, whom, soon after birth, he took away from Celie. After she loses
her two children, she is married off to a man she calls Mr. and becomes step-mother to his four children. Celie had no control over this new family; and, Nettie tried to help.

Don’t let them run over you. . . . You got to let them know who got the upper hand. . . . You got to fight (Walker 25).

Celia writes: "But I don’t know how to fight. All I know is how to stay alive" (Walker 26). Survival is the key to Celie’s existence. Her sister is forced to leave her, her own children are gone, she thinks even perhaps dead, and she has no friends. Her letter writing gives her someone to talk to, which is perhaps why she addresses them to either God or Nettie. Celie is able to find support in a new network of family: her husband’s mistress, Shug Avery, her stepson Harpo’s wife Sophia, Harpo’s mistress Squeak and eventually even Harpo and Mr. By using this vast and various network of family, Walker illustrates the strength of community. Everyone in this network treats one another with respect and dignity, except Mr. who continues to beat Celie, but the importance is not who the individual is but that the individual receives support and assistance. Walker best demonstrates this communal effort in the family’s attempt to get Sophia out of jail. In the end it was Squeak, Harpo’s mistress, who made the effort to free Sophia. Logic would seem to dictate that a husband’s mistress would not even consider helping her lover’s wife. Squeak tried to use her influence with the guard and was raped. To Squeak, it was important that she tried to help Sophia even if it meant her own safety would be at stake. The actions of this particular
family were typical of black families. In the 1930's, a study conducted by Charles S. Johnson showed that a family unit desired to regard all members of its unit on the same level of respect. The relationship was not a factor. Everyone, whether blood kin or not, was given the love and support any family member deserved (Martin and Martin 46).

As mentioned before, the folk tradition plays an important role in the understanding of *The Color Purple*. One of the traditions that these characters share is quilting and sewing. Celie and Sophia begin working on a quilt. Then Shug Avery begins to contribute. Then Celie starts to sew pants and everyone in the family contributes their ideas and wears the finished product. The preparation of food is also a central focus. The story ends with a "family" reunion on the fourth of July. Everyone is there and the family circle is complete. Celie's children had been in the care of Nettie in Africa, and now they are all home. Celie writes:

> White people busy celebrating they independence from England July 4th, say Harpo, so most black folks don’t have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each other (Walker 250).

Another form of celebration within this community is Harpo's juke joint. Both Shug and Squeak sing the blues there. It becomes a favorite spot of entertainment and pleasure. People are able to dance, listen to music, sing, and enjoy each other's company. The people in the community did not have much so they were thankful for Harpo's juke joint. It helped them escape the dreariness and uneasiness
of their own living. For a few short hours they could be involved in a carefree and easy life away from responsibilities of home, away from white people, and most of all white police.

While Celie and her kin struggle with being black in America, her sister Nettie is experiencing the diversity of African culture. One thing that she notices, not long after arriving, is song. As Nettie observed workers returning from the cocoa plantation, she writes:

As tired as they are, they sing! Celie, just like we do at home. Why do tired people sing? . . .

Too tired to do anything else . . . (Walker 132).

To Nettie, Africa is not really a foreign place. She regards it as a kind of home. It is a place where people who look much like her and have the same traditions and habits that she herself does. She is thrilled to be there; Africa seems to have some kind of mystical power. All the while, Nettie reconstructs her life for Celie; she is intense with passion and driven to illustrate every detail. She exclaims:

Did I mention my first sight of the African coast? Something struck in me, in my soul Celie, like a large bell, and I just vibrated. . . . And we kneeled down that night on deck and gave thanks to God for letting us see the land for which our mothers and fathers cried -- and lived and died -- to see again (Walker 132-33).

Nettie discovers that Africa is history, and she is being encouraged to continue seeking and experiencing its culture and richness. It is almost as if the continent called her to
dwell in its jungles and breath in its air. It is in this mystical place that Nettie is able to bond her present existence to her past.

While Nettie loves Africa, at the same time she realizes many of the tribes view woman as subordinate. Nettie’s firsthand experience is with the Olinka; she learns very quickly that Africans keep their women in the traditional role of wife and mother. They believe that "a girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something" (Walker 144). They assume that what a woman becomes could only be a mother of her husband’s children. The Olinka then are able to keep women in their subordinate roles because they feel women should not be educated. It is difficult to get a knowledgeable woman to believe she is less than she is. Nettie knows that "the world is changing" and "... is no longer a world just for boys and men" (Walker 148). Yet she realizes the Olinka women will never be able to challenge the traditional authority because they are not even permitted to look the men straight in the face. Walker seems to be illustrating the fact that there is a parallel in both cultures in the treatment of women. This common factor further bonds Nettie and Celie together because despite their years apart and different environments, society’s views of them is not much different (Butler-Evans 170).

Walker has a great admiration for Zora Neale Hurston and her work with folklore. It is clear that Walker, like Hurston, incorporates folklore in her fiction as Walker is able to capture the folklore of the Blacks not only in the
rural South but in Africa as well. She joins these two cultures separated by a vast ocean and brings one closer to the heart of the other. Perhaps even closer than those of the same country.

The lives of these characters become a kind of jubilee, bathing in the glow of local tradition, blues, and their African heritage. Walker illustrates the black family by defining those who sustain that institution. The family can no longer be characterized as father, mother, and children; instead, it is a patchwork of lovers, sisters, friends, husbands, wives, children and parents. The jagged edges and rough spots of the individual pieces stand out but once woven together with love, trust, compassion and understanding no one piece is more brighter or more dingier than the other. It is a finished product of warmth, security, and history.

In order to complete the picture of the history of the black family, there is one final period of time that needs to be understood. An examination of the black family in contemporary society is necessary in order to appreciate fully this aspect of American culture. In this instance, contemporary society is defined as the time in America from around 1950-1985.

By the 1950’s, the black family in the United States was quite different than it was earlier. The basic structure of the family no longer consisted of only two generations. The family is now multi-generational, quite often consisting of four generations, and sustaining both kin and nonkin. More and more families went from nuclear to extended. Many black families underwent this change for no other reason than
survival. The extended family is not by any means the dominant structure of today’s black family; it is, however, continually growing. In 1960, 75% of black families had both parents, in 1970 that number decreased to 67%. By 1980 it was only 60%, meaning that the number of extended and nuclear families were almost balanced. The disproportionate number of males to females, however, still continued. In 1970 there were eighty-six males for every one hundred females between the ages of 20-24, and for those between 25-34 it was eighty-four males for every one hundred females (Mintz and Kellogg 211, 212).

The real driving force behind the development of the extended families seems to be poverty. In 1980, one-third of all black households fell below the poverty line, and 70% of those were headed by females. This meant one-half of all black children lived in a house without a father (Jones 277).

Anthropologist Carol Stack examined a typical Black community in inner-city Chicago. She called this place the Flats, and her data can be viewed as representative of urban black family life. Stack defines family as

the smallest, organized, durable network of kin and nonkin who interact daily, providing for the domestic needs of children and assuring their survival (Stack 31).

Support and survival are the two main goals of the extended family. In order to provide basic needs, trading is essential. Trade occurs between families so that those who lack even the most basic needs will not be without (Stack
It is assumed by the family members that those members who need assistance will look to the family for help. It is insulting to family members to have one of their individuals search outside the extended family unit for support (Martin and Martin 33).

It is perhaps in trying to understand the modern black extended family that many Whites find the racial gap to be widening. It is impossible however for Whites to appreciate this aspect of Black life if it is only examined through white eyes. The black extended family represents a culture unique to its own. It is imperative that Whites, attempting to understand the rules that defined the actions of the black family, have a knowledge, or appreciation for black history. Whites need to learn to not only accept black culture but embrace it as another facet of American society.

Children are extremely important in the black extended family. For women, there are no traditional restrictions which permit or prohibit them from having children. Men are often encouraged by their mothers to have children. The mothers see childrearing as one way of attaining self-responsibility (Stack 46, 47, 121). Once a child is born, the entire household is responsible for its care. Parents are expected to live up to their parental roles. If any family member feels that parents are not fulfilling their obligations to the child another member of the family, usually a female, will adopt it (Stack 48). Many children are born out of wedlock because marriage is not economically feasible. The current system of welfare is based on providing assistance to single females with children who do not live
with a working male (Stack 113).

The structure of the extended family is very interesting. The entire group is headed by a dominant family figure. This is almost always an elderly woman between 60 and 85 years of age. An extended family does not necessarily all live together under one roof; often they do not. Each private household is headed by its own chosen individual, but that person always seeks the advice and consultation of the dominant family figure (Martin and Martin 19). The dominant family figure is the key to that family’s past. She is responsible for her own family’s history as well as the history of Blacks in general. She teaches others spirituals, food preparation, and the activities of previous generations. She also oversees family activities, guides the morality of her members, settles internal conflicts, and socializes the youth. She is respected by the entire family, and upon her death or decision a new family member is chosen to take her place. This member is usually well prepared to take on the responsibility of the entire family (Martin and Martin 18).

Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place is a beautifully composed novel depicting the lives of seven women who live in one urban tenement. These women have all had similar kinds of experiences which brought them to Brewster Place. They left their previous lives in search of new ones. Remarkably, these seven women become their own kind of extended family. Each one’s background helps contribute to the identity of this new extended family. The character of Mattie Michael seems to be a kind dominant family figure.
The other women trust her and count on her judgement to help them take control of their own lives again. Mattie's own story is truly tragic. She has ended up at Brewster Place because she used her home as collateral for her son's bail bond. In the end though, he never appears for his trial. She loses everything, but she was willing to take that risk for the sake of her only child. Mattie realizes, however, it is partly her own fault for his irresponsible behavior. She notes:

There was a void in his being that had been padded and cushioned over the years, and now that covering had grown impregnable... God had given her what she prayed for -- a little boy who would always need her (Naylor, *Brewster Place* 52).

The women of Brewster Place all have similar stories. Each one has had a background of despair, frustration, heartache, and tears. After coming to Brewster Place, they were able to help heal their past hurts with the salve of friendship. They depended on one another without being dependent; they relied on one another, and they themselves are reliable; and they loved one another in the true spirit of family and sisterhood.

Despite the changes the black family has undergone, one thing remains constant -- religion. In the novels of these four women, God is shown to be an identifiable aspect of their lives. During the times of slavery the master used religion to help keep order among the slaves. The slaves in turn viewed religion as a source of peace. It gave them encouragement and hope (Martin and Martin 96).
Slave spirituals reflect self-identification with the Israelites in search of the Promised Land. They believed they could endure their misery on earth in order to achieve peace for eternity. Black women saw the church as the key to survival because in it they could find "peaceful resistance to the white world" (Jones 281). Church continues to give black women a sense of self-esteem and pride. They can wear their best clothes and not have to be mindful of their job or work at home (Jones 280-281).

Most Blacks in this country found the Baptist Church to be most fulfilling. In 1895 during the early beginnings of the established Black Baptist Churches, they claimed a national membership of 3,000,000 people. The largest congregations were in the South (Taylor 145).

Church ministers are careful to incorporate both African and American characteristics into their services. This blend contributes to the self-identifications of its members both spiritually and culturally. Finally, the church offers Blacks the opportunity to be creative and self-expressive through the use of music, choir and song (Taylor 147-48).

The black family has proved to be a dynamic institution. It had to adapt constantly to the vacilating demands of White society. Despite tremendous odds, black families have endured American history while preserving their own. The black family should be one of admiration and not scorn on the part of the white Americans. Again and again, Whites put them down, but they made it clear they could not be kept down, and they would not stay down. In 1989, Alice Walker
wrote a powerful speech entitled "What can the White Man say to the Black Woman." After reading the speech, it was clear it could be applied to black families since often the pain endured by the wife or mother was shared by the rest of the family. The following is an excerpt from that speech:

What can the white man say to the black woman? For four hundred years he ruled over the black women's womb. Let us be clear. In the barracoons and along the slave shipping coasts of Africa, for more than twenty generations, it was he who bashed our babies' brains out against the rocks.... What can the white man say to the black woman? Let us look around us: Let us look at the world the white man has made for the black woman and her children.... It is a world where many of our babies die at birth, or later of malnutrition, and where many more grow up to live lives of such misery they are forced to choose death by their own hands.... What can the white man say to the black woman? Only one thing that the black woman might hear.... I will remove myself as an obstacle in the path that your children, against all odds, are making toward the light. I will not assassinate them for dreaming dreams and offering new visions of how to live. I will cease trying to lead your children for I can see I have never understood where I was going.... This is what the white man can say to the black woman. We are listening (691-692).
Works Cited


