Embodying Slavery in Contemporary American Literature:

Representations of Slavery's Enduring Influence

on Women’s Corporeal Identity

in Novels by Paule Marshall, Ellen Gilchrist, Ellen Douglas

and Gloria Naylor.

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Introduction

In Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* a reserved and dignified black woman loses control of her body as she suffers frightening hallucinations and, later, violent nausea; while in Ellen Gilchrist’s *Net of Jewels* a young white woman subjects herself to starvation, prescription drugs and fanatical exercise in her attempt to control her own physicality. In Ellen Douglas’s *Can’t Quit You Baby* two women, one white and one black, experience hearing impairment and a life threatening aneurysm, respectively, as they attempt to negotiate their lives and interact with each other. Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* offers an account of a young woman of mixed race, whose body is wracked by a debilitating disease before she finally comes to terms with her life. All these characterisations are situated with reference to slavery and its perceived continuing influence on social patterns and attitudes. These texts demonstrate the enduring power of slavery's paradigms of raced bodies in the contemporary imagination. In these novels bodies act as sites around which old ideas remain entrenched, new ideas are explored and boundaries are shifted or blurred.

This thesis, then, sets out to explore constructions of black and white women’s physicality in contemporary fiction about post-second-world-war America. In the novels examined, women’s experiences of their bodies work on many levels to parallel and reflect their social encounters, their attitudes and emotions. Aspects of the central characters’ constructed physicalities function as subtexts reinforcing themes and adding significant dimensions to the portrayals of the women’s lives. These motifs, metaphors and symbols of physicality create a kind of textual body language which provides deeper insights into the women’s thoughts and actions. Specifically, the bodies depicted in these fictions negotiate the persistent reverberations of ideologies of slavery as they continue to influence daily routines and situations. The constructions of corporeality in these texts, in terms of blackness, whiteness, femininity and interactions between them, hark back to ideas and formulations of raced and gendered bodies related to slavery. Examining the role of bodies in these novels highlights the ways in which the texts challenge and reinterpret ideas about the slaveholding
past and its influence on the present.

A number of critics have acknowledged the institution of slavery as a pervasive influence in literature by black and white writers, from the antebellum period and through the twentieth century. Missy Dehn Kubitschek has identified concerns about the influence of slavery on constructions of female identity as a common theme in twentieth century African-American fiction, from Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen to Paule Marshall and Octavia Butler, among others. She is interested in fictional interpretations of “the sense of the past’s persistence in the present” and highlights three elements of women’s quest for identity: “the decision to explore history, the absorption of heritage and the interpretation of the past’s uses in the present” (22). The texts which Kubitschek has studied are concerned with communicating the damage, denial and loss that slavery left as a legacy for African-American people. Hazel Carby, in an essay on historical novels of slavery begins with a consideration of how slavery is central to African-American literature, even when it does not provide the specific focus. She asserts that: “slavery haunts the literary imagination because its material conditions and social relations are frequently reproduced in fiction as historically dynamic; they continue to influence society long after emancipation” (Ideologies of Black Folk’ 125-6). Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, in an eloquent discussion of the persistent concern with slavery in African-American writing, enunciates the powerful and unabated influence it exerts:

As impassable as a rain-swollen river, Southern history runs like a deep dangerous current between the black American present and past.... The hold of Southern history has weighed as heavily upon Northern as Southern black women writers, for all concur that it embodies the crimes that have been perpetrated upon their people. And although they know that the North also practised slavery and then discriminated brutally against blacks... they reserve a special indignation for the full blown slave society of the South. (798)

Like Hazel Carby, Fox-Genovese talks of this influence as a kind of haunting: “The writings of African-American women writers abound with the ghosts and memories of a Southern history that anchors their own and their people’s experience even as it challenges their ability
to represent their own and their foremother's sense of self" (792). Here slavery is acknowledged as both contributing to and undermining African-American writers' attempts at personal and collective self-definition.

Yet African-American literature is not, obviously, the sole preserve of slavery's influence. Anne Goodwyn Jones and Louise Westling have offered comprehensive surveys of writing by white women which continues to respond to, and negotiate with, the effects of slavery on white women's conception of their identity and social role. Minrose Gwin's study *Black and White Women of the Old South* explores the continuing dynamic of slavery in the writing of black and white authors. She asserts that: "The simultaneous study of this variety of American literature... reflects the sheer metaphorical weight of southern slavery in the American literary consciousness" (10). Gwin's study explores the ways in which slavery's cross racial effects are expressed in fiction by and about both black and white women: "The peculiar sisterhood' which [these writers] create between their black and white fictional women... serves us well in that it provides a new entry into literary explorations of that darkness of the southern past that continues to live in the American cultural consciousness” (17). Mary Dearborn, in her study of gender and ethnicity in American culture, and specifically in the context of her discussion of miscegenation, has stated simply that: "Slavery, a far greater transgression than adultery in human history, informs all fiction that follows it” (134).

This critical study of contemporary fiction adds a further facet to this concern with slavery’s enduring significance, by identifying how constructions of women's bodies communicate ideas about slavery’s impact on their identity. This thesis traces the importance of corporeality in selected contemporary writers’ assessments of the continuing influence of the institution of slavery. Slavery’s organisation of bodies left a legacy of assumptions about physicality that are being worked through as one part of exploring the institution's residual effect. All these texts make clear that the women's feelings about physical aspects of their identity have an important influence on the way they interact with other people and with the world around them. In turn, those interactions are affected by social constructions of those
bodies. The insistent positing, in these novels, of the body as a site of interchange between culture, memory and self is powerful and opens up a constructive discussion of theories of corporeality.

This thesis does not offer a discussion of contemporary writing about the slavery period, or its immediate aftermath during Reconstruction. Novels which do have such a focus, like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* or Shirley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose*, even when they offer fascinating and meaningful constructions of female physicality, will not provide the central focus here. Rather this will be a study of contemporary writing about lives in the latter half of the twentieth century in which slavery still makes its presence felt in terms of corporeal identity. The core novels in this thesis have therefore been selected from works published in the last two decades which are all set in the post war period, collectively covering the decades from the 1950s through to the 1990s. Slavery paradigms still permeate the characterisations in these texts and reading body language as a subtext reveals the extent and form of this influence.

In the context of these novels it is the dynamics of racial constructions of bodies which are pertinent, for central to the ideology of slavery was of course an ideology of race. For women, racial distinctions interacted with concepts of femininity to construct specific expectations of social role and behaviour. The unfeasability of trying to draw clear distinctions between the constructions of race and gender has been noted more than once. As Valerie Smith has put it: “the meaning of blackness in this country shapes profoundly the experience of gender, just as the conditions of womanhood affect ineluctably the experience of race” (47). The network of practices, institutions and technologies set in place by the workings of slavery had a direct effect on the bodily routines of those women it encompassed, yet with differing impacts on the bodily expectations of black and white. These novels speak about the pressure that effect continues to exert on black and white women’s encounters with their bodies, with society through their bodies, and with each other.

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1 For an insightful discussion of constructions of physicality in *Beloved* see Mae G. Henderson’s ’Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text’ *Comparative American Identities*: 4
The dynamics of the balance of power under slavery meant that physical demands were placed most heavily upon black women, in terms of the combination of hard labour, pregnancy and childbirth, and physical and sexual abuse. While white women also came under pressure from the demands made on their bodies, race privilege alleviated, for them, the extremes slave women faced. This was especially true for women who experienced the extremes of class division: slave owner and slave. Despite this division, in fact with the result of maintaining it, constructions of slave women's and slave mistresses' bodies did not exist in isolation but very clearly in relation to each other. So while inter-racial relationships are not the sole concern here, the discussions of fictional constructions of black, white and mixed race bodies all remain attentive to the oppositional contexts of those constructions.

Exploring persistent representations of black and white women's bodies allows for an examination of just one series of interactions of gender and race in constructions of corporeality sedimented by slavery. While taking into account the male bodies depicted within these texts this thesis has not taken as its subject the implications of slave ideology on the corporeality of black or white men. To extend this thesis to encompass male centred texts and their accounts of bodily existence would be to overextend it and lose coherence and focus. These superlative novels were selected for this thesis on the basis of providing provocative and meaningful female characterisations that offer a cross section of racial representations through constructions of blackness, whiteness, interactions between the two, and concepts of mixed race identity.

Each of the novels focuses on a different manifestation of the legacy of slavery and so the selection of these four texts provides a cross-section of perspectives moving from the cultural interactions of women defined by single race categories towards increasing complex cross-racial negotiations. Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* communicates a sense of cultural dislocation created by the African diaspora, and its impact on understandings of blackness and black people's self-worth. In Ellen Gilchrist's *Net of Jewels* constructions of bodily purity among the white Southern elite, associated claims to inherent superiority and the
ensuing implications for white women’s behaviour are conveyed in the central
ccharactherisations. Relations between white and black women interacting in the context of
employer and employee around the mistress/slave paradigm, and the practical effects this has
on the women’s daily physical rituals and needs, are the focus of an analysis of Ellen
Douglas’s novel Can’t Quit You Baby. Finally, the construction of mixed race bodies, the
legacy of miscegenation and the ways that the associated taboos and cross cultural prejudices
intersect in one woman’s body are explored in Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day. This introductory
chapter will first outline the particular aspects of slavery that each novel evokes and then
move on to discuss the related issues of embodiment and corporeal identity that each one
raises.

Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow, focusing as it does on the persistent
consequences of the middle passage, the initial journey of separation of Africans from their
multifarious origins in Africa to universalising enslavement in America, offers a starting point
which explores the effects of corporeal constructions emanating from the origins of slavery.
The novel explores the devastating impact on Avey Johnson of years of negating her body in
order to deny her Afro-Caribbean heritage. The present day legacy of the diaspora is depicted
as a sense of cultural disinheritance so strong that it is manifested as extreme sickness and
lack of recognition, even effacement, of the body. Avey has attempted to assimilate to an
ideal of whiteness which she associates with prestige and class mobility. This process has
been psychologically and physically damaging and the novel presents the confrontations
which force Avey to consider and to heal that damage. The novel highlights the legacy of the
African diaspora which left African people dispersed through a society where they were
regarded as significantly morally and intellectually inferior entirely on the basis of bodily
difference.

Marshall’s novel, set in the nineteen seventies, depicts the continuing pressure
imposed by the association of positive and negative values with certain body images. The
suggested antidote to this situation is the evocation of a series of myths and rituals of bodily
existence, laden with cultural and historical significance for African and Caribbean-
Americans. Some of these offer celebratory understandings of a body’s specific cultural role, while others carry warnings of centring cultural knowledge and connection in a body. The narrative raises crucial questions about the extent to which bodies can ever exist as the origin of cultural knowledge or as a blank slate on which culture is inscribed. Thus a reading of corporeality in this novel addresses issues central to understanding slavery’s legacy of raced bodies.

The second chapter investigates the other side of slavery’s racial dichotomy: constructions of whiteness and attendant restrictions and demands upon women’s bodies among the white southern aristocracy, as portrayed through the bodily experiences of Rhoda Manning in Gilchrist’s *Net of Jewels*. Whiteness as the reverse of blackness suggests that the two exist absolutely separately and it is this opposition upon which the white elite depended for the maintenance of power and hierarchy, and which their ante-bellum justifications of slavery therefore bitterly fought to maintain and naturalise. The false assumptions and inherent contradictions embedded in this construction of race are interrogated at several junctures in relation to texts examined in this thesis. The idea of black and white as two sides of the same coin, while suggesting division, contains within it a more accurate representation of the construction of racial difference, for each side is inseparable from the other and from the whole. To acknowledge this inter-dependence of black and white, or even to go a step further and recognise their existence on a continuum, would be to seriously destabilise justifications of hierarchy.

Gilchrist’s novel *Net Of Jewels* explores the physical cost of insistence on certain constructions of white femininity in the latter half of the twentieth century, but, at the same time, fails to interrogate those demands on women’s bodies as part of a broader set of constructions of race and power. Gilchrist situates her central character within a family and social background of the fifties and sixties that emphasises the continuing influence of social norms and expectations that find their origin in the ante-bellum period. The novel posits the reality of damage done to women’s bodies in the pursuit of perfection, purity and the guarantee of racially pure offspring. In maintaining the gloss of purity and beauty the novel’s
central character is driven to a course of action which results at different times in starvation, prescription drug addiction, alcoholism and abortion.

Gilchrist’s novel counteracts notions of southern women as sexually pure and naive by insisting on the existence of their sexual desires and their need to fulfil them. The text challenges the inherently contradictory stereotype of the innocent and yet simultaneously sexually alluring young white woman by presenting sexually active women not as deviant but as retaliating against the repression of normal desires and physical needs. In the light of this revision her depiction of her black female characters is unsettling. While the depiction of her white heroines is revisionary, her portrayal of black maids, in opposition to their white employers, communicates a justification, even a celebration, of race inequality grounded in patronage that harks back to, rather than breaks from, slave ideology. Gilchrist’s black women are minor yet highly significant characters whose physicality functions within the text to confirm and support false notions of connection and bonding with their white employers.

Whereas Gilchrist’s and Marshall’s novels are concerned predominantly with either whiteness or blackness Ellen Douglas’ novel offers an uncompromising exploration of the highly complex relationship that can develop between a black woman and her white employer. Can’t Quit You Baby approaches issues that arise around the encounter between black and white bodies in a domestic sphere, which harks back to the mistress/slave paradigm. In this novel, set at the end of the sixties, Cornelia, a white woman, and Tweet, her maid, negotiate the relationship that arises from their daily meetings. The disjointed nature of the women’s association is that while it is strongly grounded in shared domestic experience it also encompasses a deep-rooted antagonism based on differences of race and class. In the domestic arena, routines and practices concerning bodies are at the fore, so the implications of white women’s physical privilege and black women’s servitude are paramount.

What is interesting in Douglas’s novel is the acknowledgement that the black woman’s own physical exertions contribute so much to the bodily management required by the white woman. The maid’s work is directly involved with helping achieve the cleaning, feeding and clothing of the white woman’s body, which in turn, while liberating the latter
from elements of drudgery, still keeps her within a confining framework. In contrast to Gilchrist’s novel which repeatedly downplays and even denies the servile nature of the work which black women perform, Douglas’ novel progresses to a point which explicitly reveals the involvement in Cornelia’s physical demands which Tweet’s job requires.

Depth and significance are added to the narrative by the way the women’s bodies express aspects of the dynamic that exists between them, even while neither of them has openly acknowledged its restricting force. Their bodies offer a performance of cultural attitudes and personal emotions. The women’s understandings of themselves and the other, based on their assumptions about race and the possibilities of cross-racial exchange, are communicated, sometimes without real awareness, through their body language. The novel persistently demands the reader’s acknowledgement of inconsistencies in the women’s relationship, of the narrator’s motivations in depicting it in a certain light, and of the role the women’s bodies play in their personal and public exchanges. Given this attentiveness to underlying assumptions, unsettling signs of a return to oppositional images of sexuality and beauty do emerge within the text. The silence surrounding the association of the white woman’s physicality with beauty, purity and power and the black woman’s physicality with overt sexuality, in a text that insistently questions silences, is a disturbing undercurrent.

In Gloria Naylor’s novel *Mama Day* the body under reconsideration is that of the offspring of slaveholder and slave. The figure of a mixed race person poses a threat in a society attempting to organise along strict lines of racial difference. Individuals of mixed race unsettle ideas of inferiority and superiority built on images of clear racial difference and their situation speaks directly to the double-consciousness of the African-American of which Du Bois so famously writes. With the portrayal of Cocoa, Naylor’s novel explores the ambiguity inherent in mixed race woman’s identity and the pressures brought to bear on her through the requirements of naming and identifying a body in either/or categories. Cocoa’s attempts to claim her identity are inextricably linked to her own and other’s perceptions of her body and her colour. From the present time of the late nineties, looking back to Cocoa’s experiences in the eighties, the novel explores the demands made on her by her life in the urban north and
her family home in the rural south, and the way these echo her own struggles with identity, with blackness and whiteness, with past and present. The novel’s examination of miscegenation, and the assumptions attached to it, offers an important revision of ideas of ownership in relation to the black woman’s body.

Two broad and interconnected theoretical debates arise from these readings. The first issue which all these texts consider is the extent to which it is possible to understand bodies as sites or sources of knowledge. They raise questions about bodies’ interactions with culture: how far they are constructed by those exchanges and can they act independently of social organisation? The second issue that is relevant here relates to the racial constructions of bodies and the arbitrary delineation of race based upon physicality. These two issues become linked in debates about bodies as sites of specifically racial knowledge. The novels offer differing representations of bodies in relation to these questions and present different accounts of bodies’ constructedness and inherent knowledge. There are elements in all the novels of embodied knowledge or memories evoking specific race connections across lifetimes and down through history. These texts are also concerned with the specific relevance of slavery’s organisation of bodies to these questions.

To describe a body as a site of knowledge allows for two different readings of that body: either as a source of knowledge or the surface upon which knowledge is inscribed. Often bodies are referred to as places of cultural inscription, suggesting a one way process in which passive bodies receive active culture. In her essay ‘The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity’ Susan Bordo offers an encapsulation of ways bodies are understood to function in relation to culture. The body can be read as a medium of culture, a symbolic form, a surface upon which culture is inscribed and as a metaphor for culture. Bordo groups all these in terms of the body as a ‘text’ of culture. These ways of perceiving the body locate culture as exterior to the body. The term ‘medium’ is interesting however because it begins to suggest some kind of response or involvement of a body in the reception of culture. In contemporary theories of corporeality the extent of a body’s active engagement with social process is central to the debate, as Bordo goes on to express in her overview of critical perspectives.
This understanding has been opened up by Michel Foucault's explication of bodies produced and organised through daily practices and habits. Lois McNay has described Foucault's approach to history as "an examination of the way in which the body is arbitrarily and violently constructed in order to legitimise different regimes of domination" (16). On the same lines, contemporary rethinking about bodies has been crucially influenced, as Bordo makes clear, by feminism's recognition that "culture's grip on the body is a constant, intimate fact of everyday life". All these novels are concerned with the ways such negotiations between bodies and their environs are informed by references back to slavery's power structures and racial categories.

Ideas about bodies as socially constructed rest on a problematic premise, however, for while attempting to reject the idea of naturally inherent characteristics and to insist on bodies as constantly mediated, such theories work on the assumption of a prior unmediated space, as Judith Butler has pointed out and discussed in depth. Outlining bodies' engagements with culture is still usually a discussion of engagement between separate entities. The idea of bodies as a medium for culture also carries the suggestion that cultural influences and practices will resound in a certain way through the different media of particular bodies. Can bodies ever be a space uninfluenced by cultural mediations or contain inherent knowledge prior to cultural intercourse? Butler insists that the concept of social practice exerting an influence on the body works on the false premise of the body as an unconstructed space. She posits instead an understanding of the body as "matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call matter" (9, emphasis in original). From the moment of conception bodies are engaged in interactions that constantly define and redefine a body in relation to other bodies. This reconfiguration of bodies is approached in Moira Gaten's and Rosi Braidotti's vocabulary of corporeality. Rosi Braidotti has used the word 'interface' to describe her understanding of bodies' roles in the reception of, and interaction with, social practices that affect them. Her phrasing allows the body to be neither fixed biology nor just the product of social conditioning, but the place where the two coincide: "the 'body' is rather to be thought
of as the point of intersection, as the interface between the biological and the social” (quoted in McNay, 24). Moira Gatens insists on a shift in perspective that no longer views form, or biology, as determining culture but that explores how culture can ‘constitute’ bodies. This viewpoint allows an undercutting of entrenched assumptions: “This approach allows us to shift the conceptual ground from the question ‘How is the body taken up in culture?’ to the more profitable question ‘How does culture construct the body so that it is understood as a biological given?’” (Towards a Feminist Philosophy, 52). These differing and provocative perspectives on bodies challenge the assumption “that we ever know or encounter the body - not only the bodies of others but our own bodies - directly or simply” (Bordo 35). This thesis aims to recognise this complex encounter with bodies and elucidate the way slavery’s heritage continues to contribute to it, as produced in these texts.

The organisation of physicality in these novels confronts questions about essential characteristics, embodied knowledge and processes of construction, particularly in relation to racial identity. Immediately that attempts are made to racially quantify bodies, it becomes clear that to fix definitions and categories is an impossible task. Acknowledging processes of cultural and bodily mediation allows a recognition of the ways certain biological features have been situated as universal and attributed certain characteristics and value judgements. Critics interrogating constructions of blackness in fiction have increasingly drawn attention to the ways in which texts contribute to fixed notions of black identity and inherent physicality. Henry Louis Gates Jr has devoted much attention to explicating the function of race as a trope: “Race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application” (Critical Inquiry, 5). His writing delineates the processes by which notions of race become fixed:

The sense of difference defined in popular uses of the term “race” has both described and inscribed differences of language, belief system, artistic tradition, and gene pool, as well as all sorts of supposedly natural attributes.... The relation between “racial character” and these sorts of characteristics has been inscribed through tropes of race, lending the sanction of God, biology or the natural order to even presumably
unbiased descriptions of cultural tendencies and differences. (Critical Inquiry, 5)

Diana Fuss has called for a closer look at the production of racial subjects and “an approach which intervenes in the essentialist, constructionist polemic that has hitherto imprisoned ‘race’ in a rigidified and falsifying logic” (92). This study explores the ways that these novels have adopted perspectives which continue to inscribe race as fixed; as well as the ways in which their approaches productively destabilize racial classifications.

In this context the thesis makes use of critics who have attempted to expose the instability of supposedly fixed inherent difference by intervening at the boundaries. Beliefs about the nature of racial bodies and their differences which have endured so doggedly since slavery are infused with multiple inconsistencies. Samira Kawash asserts that in order to function to regulate social distinctions within slavery, and to order norms and expectations ever since, race had to be produced as an “irrefutable bodily marking” (148). To be black was to be the very embodiment of subjugation, inferiority and degeneracy, while to be white was therefore to embody power, superiority and perfection. Yet, as Kawash clarifies, at the boundaries of racial differentiation, where the distinguishing marks become impossible to locate, all that remains is the insistence that difference exists. With extreme irony then, race now becomes a disembodied concept: racial categorisation is unrelated to actual differences or similarities between bodies.

Kawash’s queries point to the need to acknowledge constructions of racial characteristics as pertinent to conceptions not just of blackness but also of whiteness. The fiction of whiteness as embodying neutrality, universality and of existing outside of understandings of race has been undermined by recent critical attention from the likes of Richard Dyer and Ruth Frankenberg. Susan Gubar’s study Racechanges also attests to the ambiguity and shifting nature of representations of blackness and whiteness, to what she early on outlines as the suggestive meanings embraced by the term racechange: “the traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability... pan racial mutuality” (5). Gubar’s attention to both the subversive possibilities that exist on the boundaries of racial impersonation and the recalcitrant racist assumptions that so often
permeate acts of racechange reveal dynamics at work on the construction of race in its broadest application. Whether or not bodies can be located as the site of racial actuality they remain as the site of racial discipline and subjectification. This has serious implications for the lived experience of those who, regardless of their colour, are categorised as black; as different from white; as inferior.

These critics are all challenging concepts of bodily existence that reduce and limit individuals' lives and interactions on the basis of falsely constructed and naturalised ideas of bodily difference. The institutions and accompanying ideologies of slavery were an almighty force in shaping qualitative attitudes to supposedly racially innate bodies in the American imagination. What it is interesting to realise then is that the concept of innate bodily characteristics is central to several of the fictional texts explored here, as a positive and empowering concept for understanding individuals. Both Praisesong and Mama Day explicitly acknowledge the workings of social practices as contributing to an individual and collective understanding of physicality. Hence, while they present a drawing away from bodiliness towards a reliance on the mind’s knowledge to aid cultural survival, they simultaneously depict a body’s inherent knowledge as a resource for overcoming cultural and social disenfranchisement. In Net of Jewels the representations of assumptions about racial purity illustrate the persistent power of beliefs about integral racial qualities. The location of bodies as a site of knowledge remains an important and central concept in these texts, and one which is seen as a potential resource for recovering a valuable sense of self and community. This perspective persists despite the uses of such theories to denigrate individuals and deny them autonomy. It seems important in Praisesong and in Mama Day to challenge slavery’s control of bodily practice by turning theories of inherent knowledge around against that denigration. This can open new understanding of attitudes and viewpoints, yet also retrench limiting conceptions of bodies.

All these texts express anxiety about the relations between mind and body and about the potentially both limiting and empowering concept of memory and culture located in a person’s body. These queries are directly relevant to understanding of racial bodies; for a
hierarchical perspective has been in place where the mind is associated with superior logic, and with whiteness and/or masculinity; while the body is associated with inferiority and lack of reason, and with blackness and/or femininity. These texts struggle to balance rewritings of attitudes to physical existence without collusion with reductive attitudes. It is interesting that some critics have argued not for a rejection of the body as a location of culture, but a reconsideration of the split that allows for such a separation of knowledge and matter. Critical works by Katherine Fishburn and Laura Doyle, tracing portrayals of embodiment in nineteenth century slave narrative and experimental modern fiction respectively, both call on theories of intercorporeality to contextualize the fictions they are exploring. That is, they make readings which attempt to conceive of the mutual interrelatedness of what western philosophy has designated as the separate entities of mind and body. The critical works by Fishburn and Doyle attempt to acknowledge a trend in the literature of the time period they are investigating and to do justice to those texts by contextualising them in a framework that allows their accounts to be heard.

Doyle's focus is the construction, in experimental modern fiction, of racially designated bodies as engaged with the world fundamentally in terms of their corporeality. She concentrates specifically on the racial constructions of mothers' bodies as existing at the boundaries of self and other; of place and displacement; of knowledge in the body and constituting new bodies. Doyle traces nineteenth-century conceptions of biological determinism which offer descriptions of materiality in terms of domination and enclosure. Yet she begins to find in Darwin's work traces of the concepts of relatedness and interreferentiality which surface fully later in Merleau-Ponty's notions of reversibility. Doyle finds this perspective a crucial antidote to the false separation of being and body, spirit and matter that infiltrates Western thought. She utilises Merleau-Ponty's idea of intercorporeality, of the "dynamic contingency" of bodies with the world, in her readings of an eclectic range of texts. Her attention to "the articulateness inherent in the physical" offers a way of reading that is alert to these texts' investment in corporeality.

Fishburn's text sets out to explore what seems to have been a precedent for the
assertions of body-rooted knowledge in these contemporary novels. She locates in African-American texts written over a century earlier, the same preoccupation with bodies as sources of knowledge and therefore identity. However, the examples she posits as expressions of “the slave body’s primordial awareness of human interconnectedness” are often examples of learned or culturally inscribed awareness. While her acknowledgement of the narratives’ depictions of embodied knowledge is pertinent, she glosses over the tensions about bodies that they express.

The novels discussed here are also crisscrossed with inconsistencies which reveal anxieties about the extent and source of bodily knowledge and power. The readings of these texts that follow will argue that expressions of culturally specific embodiment are a recurring theme, but also that rejection of bodies as limiting and dangerous is a concurrent theme. This tension is expressive of attempts to escape damaging constraints associated with specific bodies and yet, simultaneously locate in bodies a source of identity denied by the institution of slavery’s denigration of particular kinds of bodies.

Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* offers an alternative to denigrations of black bodies through an understanding of them as channels of knowledge. Avey Johnson recovers her sense of being a valuable individual through an intimate reconnection with her body. From this perspective the individual’s body is understood not as divorced from cultural knowledge and community identity, but integral to it. Now the body carries not only knowledge of cultural identity, but memories of social discipline: the middle passage, the scars from whippings, the pain of hunger, the frustration of voicelessness and the threat of lynchings. Over a century after the emancipation of the slaves Avey’s personal emancipation comes from simultaneously acknowledging institutionalised abuse, and celebrating the body despite that abuse. Avey and Jerome still function in fear of beatings they have witnessed and still drive themselves to work ever harder to keep poverty and hunger at bay. They project whiteness onto their own self-images to permit themselves a feeling of community with respectability. Yet with her husband's death, and her dreams of her ancestors, Avey cannot sustain this self-punishment or denial and the stages of rediscovery of her body are matched
by stages of discovery of her cultural inheritance.

Yet in this novel, and in Mama Day too, despite the positing of a harmonious return to the body, the separation between mind and body is persistently put forward as a helpful strategy. The ideology of slavery was not purely an ideology of race, but was further complicated by concepts of property and ownership. The dividing mark of the colour line also functioned as a mark of the property line, as Samira Kawash eloquently makes clear: “Black is presumed to be slave, property of another, while white is presumed to be person, holder of property in the self.... The foundational legal distinction between person and property became hopelessly muddled in the body of the slave” (44). The inherent contradiction of being simultaneously subject and object resolves itself in these two fictions in the survival strategy of distinguishing between mind and body. If the black woman’s body has been owned, these texts propose that her mind remains her own. The mind is able to transcend the body and connect with memories and knowledge that empower individuals while their bodies remain shackled. Here psychological resistance is presented as the antidote to physiological restrictions.

In Praisesong for the Widow, Avey Johnson reconnects with her mentor, great aunt Cuney, in a dream, and is reminded of Cuney’s grandmother whose “body was in Tatem, but her mind was gone with the Ibo”. Inspired by the Ibo rejection of slavery, walking out across the water back to Africa, Avey’s ancestor shifted her mental location. Barbara Christian comments on this story of resistance:

This story of Africans who were forced to come across the sea - but through their own power, a power that seems irrational, were able to return to Africa - is a touchstone of New World black folklore. Through this story, peoples of African descent emphasised their own power to determine their freedom, though their bodies might be enslaved. They recalled Africa as the source of their being. (151-2)

This last comment points to a central contradiction in Praisesong (and in Mama Day) for the novels posit, at different times, both the body and the mind as providing access to Africa as a “source of their being”. Situating the mind as the channel of knowledge and identity denies
the body’s role in the process of interacting with society, but situating the body as a locus of cultural knowledge risks emulating oppressive attitudes to bodies which insist on a hierarchy of essential difference. This first chapter will argue that this is a tension which persists throughout *Praisesong*, but which is not always addressed, and certainly not resolved. Furthermore, this lack of resolution communicates the anxiety that surrounds corporeal identity in the novel.

Turning from a consideration of black bodily existence the second chapter examines constructions of whiteness in Ellen Gilchrist’s *Net of Jewels*. In Gilchrist’s text, Rhoda does make claims about power connected with the body, sometimes in terms of her family’s genealogy and sometimes in terms of a universalising understanding of her body as part of the matter of all being. In both scenarios there are allusions to images of coldness, light and power, recalling myths of Aryan purity. In this way then, Rhoda’s understanding of her body as a site of cultural knowledge and power is not a reclamation of autonomy and dignity but a reaffirming of institutionalised power already claimed by whites. Yet this white purity and power creates a double bind for white women who are part of the establishment. It is a bind which is illustrated by the novel’s characterisations and plot sequences but which is often not acknowledged outright in the text. The narrator’s account of her life seems startlingly unaware of the contradictions and inconsistencies it contains and her statements are frequently misguided and misleading. The novel’s preface claims that the text will trace the narrator’s gaining of freedom from her father. Despite her bold avowal the novel’s conclusion sees her falling asleep in the security of her father’s arms. The misleading initial claim has wider implications, for her father’s influence is connected with the values of the white southern patriarchy that he espouses. Rhoda asserts that getting free from the past is “what this country is about”. In this context the past is the past of slavery, of which the present carries a heavy residue. This chapter explores the novel’s positing of that past as still maintaining a clear influence over Rhoda and her sense of herself and her body.

For black women under slavery there was a struggle to claim ownership of the body, as whites’ claims to black bodies as property had real practical effects upon black women’s
control of their physical existence. The status of black bodies as inferior, even animalistic, is challenged with a reclamation of dignity, of humanity and of beauty. Upper-class white women functioned within a different framework: served by blacks, upheld as exemplary by whites, claims of white beauty and purity focus on white women’s bodies. Beauty becomes a concept both limiting and damaging. How does someone reclaim the positive aspects of their physicality if concepts of beauty and empowerment have been distorted by abuses of power? This second chapter explores the tension created when Rhoda sometimes responds to demands on her physical being by thwarting social expectations, while in other ways her understanding of her body is completely in keeping with white assumptions of superiority and universality. It is argued here that the text acknowledges the limits and dangers of this attitude to physicality but at the same time glosses over the difficulties of relinquishing ideas about beauty and power. These inconsistencies revolve around an investment in notions of white corporeal superiority.

References in the text to inherent qualities of white bodies often express attitudes in conjunction with ideas of white racial purity. References to white bodies also locate them as just one part of the light and atomic structure that constitutes the universe. Throughout the text there are regular allusions to Rhoda’s body as made up of, and therefore at one with, the elements that pervade the universe. White bodies are depicted as sites of knowledge, but this understanding is disguised by the idea that they contain a universal knowledge and are part of a radiant universe. Furthermore, this understanding of universality is synonymous with white western culture. Such a perception of whiteness finds its origins in nineteenth century racial ideologies of whiteness as superior. Yet whiteness here is not acknowledged as racially specific, a perspective which itself owes a debt to nineteenth-century race conceptions. Concepts of white racial superiority contain the inherent and impossible contradiction of denying the body, of insisting on specific physical features to prove mental supremacy and yet simultaneously transcending the limits of crude physicality. In keeping with these ideas about transcendent physicality it is the ability to deny bodily demands that is seen as beneficial to the self. It is seen as praiseworthy to discipline and control the body’s needs.
When this physicality has been transcended then bodies can be understood once again as at one with the universe. This second chapter elucidates the novel's engagement with the paradox that white women have to find a way to reconcile achieving standards of physical perfection while creating the illusion that racial flawlessness is a given.

In Douglas's novel *Can’t Quit You Baby* the text actively engages with questions of bodies’ abilities to store knowledge, to act as sites of memory and to express attitudes through body language. In this way the novel engages with a perspective on physicality in keeping with Laura Doyle’s understanding of articulate bodies; of “the subjectivity of bodies, the articulateness inherent in the physical, the inextricability of sentience and speech” (67). This novel differs from those so far discussed in that it does not overtly suggest the embodiment of specifically racial knowledge. What Cornelia and Tweet’s bodies gradually communicate is buried memories and withheld feelings. The issue here is not so much that bodies carry specifically racial knowledge, but that how individuals physically engage with the world is crucially affected by their sense of their place in it as racial beings. Furthermore it explores not simply notions of embodied blackness or whiteness but their mutual interrelatedness and interactions. The feelings of denial, anger and repression that have been encoded in Tweet and Cornelia’s bodies frequently arose from, or have been reinforced by, assumptions of racial hierarchy. Here race relations influence the kind of knowledge that becomes embodied and the possibility of acknowledging that embodiment. Interactions with an embodied racial Other alert the two women to the ways assumptions rooted in a racial power imbalance have affected the ways they understand their bodies. However, there do remain, within the narration, unexamined associations between specific bodies and certain qualities that are at odds with the active reassessment of self and physicality the central characters engage in. As in all the novels discussed here tensions exist where depictions of bodies do not correlate across an entire text. These tensions are expressive of the extreme difficulty involved in fully acknowledging ingrained attitudes to race and bodies.

In Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* there is a return to a representation of culture and racial heritage rooted in body knowledge. The complexity of this issue is intensified here by
the need to question: what culture? and whose heritage? With the creation of the character Cocoa, the novel confronts the issue of miscegenation and mixed race offspring, an issue at the heart of exposing limiting and arbitrary race boundaries. The construction of a mixed race body offers challenges to the notion of culturally specific embodiment. In the characterisation of Cocoa the novel explores attempts to reconcile such challenges to an individual’s sense of self; to debate questions of identity and who to identify with. On several levels it confronts the subject with fresh perspectives that demand rethinking of old assumptions. Cocoa’s physicality is constructed as an expression of the conflicts in her identity, with her devastating illness as the ultimate embodiment of anxiety.

Yet while the novel proposes that the anxiety is overcome by reconsidering the balance of agency and control, between enslaved African and enslaving European, both of whom are Cocoa’s ancestors, the depiction of her embodied cultural knowledge continues to be slanted towards identifications with Africa. The account of Cocoa’s physical condition assumes that bodies are a site of knowledge on several levels: of personal memories, of family and community memories and of social memories of cultural heritage, all buried deep but accessed by physical experience. If this knowledge is the case, where then is Cocoa’s embodied recollection of European, specifically Norwegian, heritage and how is it possible to distinguish where knowledge of whiteness or blackness begins or ends? This novel urges a consideration of racial embodiment, but not in the terms just of African embodiment, as in *Praisesong*, or white embodiment, as in *Net of Jewels*, but the adjustments and reconciliations demanded by their intersection. In this way, it will be argued, the novel confronts questions about the embodiment of slavery’s heritage at the boundaries of identity, and the tensions that exist in this text express a process of coming to terms with that heritage that still continues.

The concluding comments to this thesis attempt to offer not just a summation of the ideas presented, or a drawing out of central themes, but thoughts about the ways in which readings of corporeality can be extended into other critical surveys. In offering a brief explication of Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* and Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* in terms of excluded and negated bodies the aim is to suggest that constructions of physicality are productive sites from
which to read texts, even when they are an absent presence. Jones' creation of a woman who wants to move beyond defining her body purely in terms of reproducing the slave-holding past, and Morrison's depiction of a community which denies the extent to which their understandings of bodies remain locked in the past, both offer accounts of bodies which have become unreliable or completely rejected. This perspective on reading bodies supports the concluding argument that whether bodies are directly acknowledged or seemingly excluded, reading body language as a subtext reveals how much fictive bodies can be invested with meaning, and opens up opportunities for discovering the continuing significance of corporeality in relation to slavery and its perceived racial dynamic.
As an epigraph to the section entitled ‘Lave Tete’, the third section of her novel *Praisesong for the Widow*, Paule Marshall uses a brief quotation from a poem by Randall Jarrell: “Oh, Bars of my... body, open, open!” (148). It is in this section that Avey Johnson, the novel’s protagonist, becomes aware of her body as a repository of memory; as a place where physical sensation echoes emotional feeling. This awareness is pivotal in Avey’s progress from a state of denial to acceptance of her heritage. This chapter aims to explore Marshall’s construction of a fictional body as a site of cultural expression and memory. Avey’s body communicates to her what she has taught her conscious mind to ignore: her disconnection from her own sense of herself and from the African-American and Caribbean heritage which is a crucial part of that self. Through the processes of extreme physical discomfort, illness, purging, healing, bathing and dancing, Avey is able to make an emotional journey that restores her awareness of her cultural inheritance. I will argue, however, that the novel’s portrayal of Avey’s emotional and physical rebirth, while raising important questions about the cultural identity of African- and Caribbean-Americans, is disconcerting in terms of the suggestion that it is possible to return to an unmediated state of being, to a tabula rasa of mind and body. The idea, suggested in the novel, that Avey’s memories of Africa are an essential part of her being, while her American identity is a socially constructed one, is problematic.

In the present time of the novel’s opening chapters Avey Johnson has become so detached from her own heritage that she does not consciously recognize that it has been lost. She is alerted to what is missing in her life in two ways: by her subconscious, through the bodily symbols in a dream, and by her physical reaction to her situation, her body’s illness. These two developments precipitate Avey’s hurried departure from the cruise ship she is
traveling on, but instead of returning to her home in New York as she anticipated, events conspire to take her on a journey of grieving and discovery. The actual excursion which Avey is embarked upon while her metamorphosis occurs, recalls other culturally significant journeys, which Avey must remember in order to restore her physical and emotional health. At significant moments during the Caribbean cruise she is taking, and the subsequent journeys she makes to escape it, Avey recollects childhood trips up the Hudson with people from her neighborhood, trips to her family’s old home in South Carolina, a legendary journey of Ibo slaves’ return to Africa and the original journey of the slave passage. In all of these journeys the body is of crucial significance. This chapter aims to examine the way the body functions in the text not only as an indicator of personal consciousness, but also as a metaphor for African people’s cultural disinheritance created by the African diaspora. It also aims to draw attention to the disparity presented in the novel between acknowledging the body as an avenue of expression and yet wanting to escape its limitations.

Inconsistencies in the portrayal of Avey’s body in Marshall’s novel convey anxiety about the possible extent and source of bodily-located knowledge and power. The text explicitly acknowledges the workings of social practice in contributing to an individual and collective understanding of physicality. Yet, simultaneously, events in the novel present a body’s inherent knowledge as a resource for overcoming social and cultural disenfranchisement. The text does not confront its own contradictions. The differing attitudes to Avey’s body are not addressed, but are presented as a coherent solution to her personal crisis. There seems to be no sense of incompatibility between the body as a source of knowledge and the importance of separating mind from body. These disparities will be discussed for what they can productively reveal about the difficulties of negotiating autonomy in a racist society. My thesis here is that such contradictions, rather than undermining the novel’s integrity, go to the heart of the sense of diaspora disconnection which it communicates. These tensions are expressive of attempts to escape bodies’ limiting associations while finding in an individual’s body a source of identity denied by ideological denigration of black bodies.
In Barbara Christian’s article on ritualistic process in *Praisesong for the Widow*, the first critical response to the novel, she asserts that Marshall’s novels demonstrate “how a visceral understanding of their history and rituals can help black people transcend their displacement” (149). The idea of a visceral understanding expresses with wonderful lucidity the process of Avey’s experience: a conscious awareness precipitated by bodily response. Yet, since Christian’s essay, no critic has taken up this perspective on Marshall’s writing. The term visceral evokes the idea of gut-reaction and of engagement with the world of ideas without forfeiting attention to bodily interactions. It suggests a slippage between clear distinctions of mind and body. Christian’s essay addresses the issue of mind and body dualism in relation to the cultural rituals Avey takes part in, but redefines the separation of mind and body as a process not of denial, or of concern with hierarchy, but of survival. The separation of mind and body, Christian states, “is characterized not as fragmentation but as a source of wisdom” (150). This separation was initially enabling for people of African descent because, while their bodies might have been enslaved, they were able to determine their freedom by recalling Africa “as the source of their being” (152). Christian traces the occasions in the novel when the body is in one place but the mind is in another. What is not accounted for is when it is the body, not the mind, that proffers knowledge: Avey may mentally fail to comprehend a situation but experiences a bodily response which enables understanding. Christian’s conclusion that the novel can be read in the context of African cosmology that body and mind must not be split begins to explore just one aspect of the complex construction of bodily existence in this novel.

Despite the avenues for investigation which Christian’s essay presents there has been no sustained study of the depiction of physicality in Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*. The critical work completed on the novel so far has mainly focused on three interconnecting aspects: the account of pan-African cultural reclamation as antidote to diaspora disconnection; the processes of ceremony, ritual and dance to achieve that reclamation, and one woman’s journey of healing and self-discovery as a metaphor for the African and Caribbean communities’ potential reconnection with African heritage. Beginning with Velma
Pollard’s article on cultural connections and continuing with the work of Abena Busia, Eugenia Collier, Gay Wilentz, Dorothy Hamer Denniston and Joyce Pettis, there has been a concern with the theme of reclaiming lost cultural ground and the process of a return to wholeness. While all these critics note the significant moments of physical change that mark Avey’s shifting attitude, none offers an account of Avey’s physicality as integral throughout her process of rediscovery, nor do they trace the ways her understanding of her body are pivotal to her understanding of her culture.

Two critical works refer directly to the healing process. Ann Armstrong Scarboro’s essay on healing focuses on psychological self-renewal as it develops through the novel, but does not explore how physiological aspects are integrated into that renewal. Again, while the essay references several of Avey’s physical changes it does not analyze the construction of Avey’s body as it pertains to her healing. Paulette Brown-Hinds’s article focuses specifically on dance as a healing process. She discusses the social significance of dance, and the stories associated with certain dances, as a measure of cultural connection between America, the Caribbean, and Africa. She recounts the progression through the novel of dance as an empowering, forgotten and then rejuvenating element in a process of self-reclamation. She does fleetingly acknowledge the body’s engagement with dance. Citing Katherine Dunham’s explication of funeral dances as an externalization of energy she extends this perspective to Avey’s experience: “If, as Dunham argues, emotions like anger and grief are best resolved by either violent or rhythmic motor activity, then Avey’s physical movement can be read like a text, charting her internal thoughts and emotions” (114). However she does not expand upon this reading or develop this perspective further.

G. Thomas Couser has considered the role of personal and collective memory in Marshall’s novel. Couser emphasizes the importance of memory in the context that, for certain ethnic groups, history may have been suppressed or sanitized to the extent that “the only history is memory” (107). Interestingly memory is understood here in terms of a mind and body separation: “Insofar as to remember is to have one’s body in one place and one’s mind in another, the novel’s narrative line, which is determined by Avey’s newly activated,
volcanic memory, dramatizes the complex dynamics of African American consciousness” (111). This observation is helpful in understanding the construction of memory in the novel. What is not explored, however, is the way this perspective is complicated by the novel’s portrayal of memory as located in the body and accessed through physical change. For Avey her memories of other times and other places are embodied memories, bound inextricably with her physicality.

Yet while these critics do not fully take up the issue of corporeality, their concern with a return to wholeness and a sense of integrated identity is related to the way Marshall constructs the body in this novel in terms of a search for unity. Focusing on the role of the body in this context raises questions about the validity or possibility of such a return. The text conveys the message that there can never be a return to wholeness that erases knowledge of the divisions encountered along the way: it must be a wholeness that encompasses contradiction and difference. The incongruities in the novel, between presenting diaspora identity in terms of a mind/body dichotomy or in terms of a state of embodied knowledge, signify that, for a descendent of the African diaspora, reconciliation with a culturally specific self will forever contain its own contradictions.

In the dream that signals Avey’s first steps towards acknowledging her diaspora heritage, she receives a visit from her great-aunt Cuney, the woman responsible for her naming, and a significant and nurturing figure during Avey’s young life. Avey’s great-aunt was instrumental in her naming because Cuney’s grandmother had come to her in a dream, announcing that the unborn child would be a girl sent by the ancestors. Cuney insisted that the child should be given the grandmother’s name: Avatara. As an adult Avey scorns the name Cuney had given her and also many of the stories she had taught her. It is this rejection that ultimately causes Avey so much pain and which the dream enacts. Avey had heard the stories from her aunt when, as a child, she spent a month each summer at Cuney’s home in Tatem, one of the South Carolina tidewater islands. An important ritual during those visits was her aunt’s telling of the legend of the Ibos, brought to the island in slave ships. The story of the Ibo people’s arrival on the island is a compelling one:
"It was here that they brought 'em. They taken 'em out of the boats right here where we’s standing.... And the minute those Ibos was brought on shore they just stopped, my gran’ said, and taken a look around. A good long look.... And they seen things that day you and me don’t have the power to see. ‘Cause those pure-born Africans was peoples my gran’ said could see in more ways than one. The kind can tell you ‘bout things happened long before they was born and things to come long after they’s dead. (37-38)

What the Ibo see causes them to turn around and walk back out across the water towards the ocean. They reject what they see of slavery, even what they see after emancipation, and set off back to Africa. The magnitude of their defiance is communicated in mythical terms of corporeal transcendence. Accepting the stories as a child, Avey grows skeptical as she grows older. Cuney’s faith, however, is in the physical reality of the Ibos’ experience and she will not tolerate her great niece’s doubt. Her faith amounts to a literal belief in the Ibos’ story, the belief that it is possible to defy the body’s limitations and in so doing, to escape the bonds of enslavement. Cuney’s grandmother, however, saw the legend as describing spiritual release. Cuney says: “my gran’ declared she just picked herself up and took off after ‘em. In her mind. Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos...” (39). Such a perspective offers a mechanism for enduring, an emotional strategy for rising above subjugation. As an adult Avey persists in ignoring the story of the Ibos’ rebellion and remains unable to accept the literal translation, or to attach meaning to the story. In this way she is unable to draw emotional support from an account of black resistance to white domination.

So in the dream, Cuney appears as someone Avey wishes to escape from. Her aunt invites her to go back and acknowledge this story of African cultural dislocation. She pleads with her to repeat once more the rituals of recognizing those ancestors, which she took part in as a child, but in her dream Avey’s body enacts her resistance to her aunt’s message and refuses to move. As Avey digs in her heels Cuney attempts to force her into motion: “In seconds a hand with the feel of a manacle had closed around her wrist, and she found herself
being dragged forward in the direction of the Landing" (43). The image of the manacle here implies Avey's feeling that her aunt wants to chain her to the past, to prevent her breaking free from memory. She clearly sees an engagement with the past as negative; restricting the body and limiting progress. The manacle also clearly signifies the memory of slavery which she is trying to ignore. Avey's determination not to have to go back, not to have to remember, and her aunt's determination that she should, results in a physical fight between the two women. With hideous force, Avey tries to beat the old woman down. As Aunt Cuney fights back, Avey clings desperately and unsuccessfully to the trappings of status which clothe her body and which are torn from her.

Equally significant to the dream for Avey is the extreme physical discomfort that she feels the following day. Sitting in the opulent dining room of the cruise ship, she finds herself completely unable to eat a mouthful of the extravagant dessert, to even lift the spoon to her mouth, as she is stricken with a fleeting paralysis. She is startled by this incident and by the stomach upset that accompanies it. Although she has only eaten lightly, she feels that she has gorged herself. She has a "mysterious clogged and swollen feeling" which at its worst feels as though "a huge tumor had suddenly ballooned up at her center" (52). This physical discomfort is indicative of the layers of accumulated wealth and superficial respectability which have left Avey bloated with false values. Excessive consumption has helped her to suppress her connection with her past.

The dream and the illness powerfully indicate, with bodily experience as a constant point of reference, the barrier between Avey and any association with her complex cultural origins. While troubled by the events, Avey remains unaware of their significance. What has contributed to this situation is the perspective on the world that she and her husband, Jerome, developed during the years of their marriage. All pleasure in, and acknowledgment of, themselves became subsumed within an attempt to prove themselves on equal terms with white folks by accruing material possessions. Avey took her first cruise a year after her husband's death and on that and following trips she both commemorates, and continues to use, the wealth and status that Jerome strove for all his working life. From the beginning
Avey loved the cruises, starting with her first sight of the "dazzling white steel" of the Bianca Pride, whose color and name perpetuates the same associations as Avey's suburban home in North White Plains. Her emphasis on the importance of material things in life is demonstrated by the excessive luggage she takes. Her perception that whiteness is synonymous with status is revealed by her ardent desire not to behave any differently from the rest of the, mainly white, passengers, even though, to them, she simply does not exist. In order to maintain her dignity Avey has taken to ignoring anything that challenges her belief that she has gained social parity in the eyes of white society. Yet on this trip reminders of white rejection do begin to bother her. Now, four years after her husband's death, Avey's perspective is changing. The dream and the experience at the mealtime, in both of which the body exists as a site of struggle, have drawn her attention to the process of cultural negotiation and conflict that she is subject to as an African-American woman. Finding that unbearable, she determines to leave the ship.

Her response to anxiety initially remains one of avoidance and denial but even before she has managed to leave the ship her changed awareness dramatically affects what she sees in her surroundings. The shuffle board game appears to her to be people "clubbing each other with the murderous sticks" while the quoit game makes the sound of "some blunt instrument repeatedly striking human flesh and bone" (56). Now that Avey is becoming responsive to her own pain, memories of other people's pain, which she has blocked out, begin to surface. She has ignored the plight of other black Americans, and resisted over the years any knowledge of the developing civil rights movement. Now, suddenly, she remembers watching a black man, innocent of any crime, being beaten by the police. She does not understand why that memory should return so clearly and feels that her ears and eyes have become unreliable. She has come to rely on her senses to block out any reminders of the difficulties and conflicts of her life as a black woman in America, but a process of remembering has been set in motion that continues after she has left the ship and traveled to a hotel on the island of Grenada. Waiting in the hotel for a flight back to New York, the return of the extreme discomfort in her belly brings on an interval of violent grieving for what she realizes she and her husband lost in their
persistent yearning for wealth and stability. The perceptions that accompany her grieving are consistently framed in relation to her knowledge of her body.

As Avey begins to face up to all that she and her husband had lost, she begins to understand the real value of what is gone: the small personal moments that were none the less significant rituals and celebrations. She recalls the jazz and blues music which they had loved and to which they had danced together. She remembers fragments of poetry they used to recite, by Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Langston Hughes. And she recalls the summer pilgrimages they used to make to Tatem. Thinking back, her awareness reaches down deeper to recognize that their own personal rituals were something that connected them with their own heritage in a valuable and affirming way: “something in those small rites, an ethos they held in common, had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay’s to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible” (137). Their celebration of themselves was a celebration of their cultural inheritance that provided them with a sense of protection and power. Significantly the jazz and blues music that meant so much to Avey and Jerome offers a celebration of hybridity, a demonstration of the positive creative results of cultural interchange. The poetry that speaks to them so vitally is concerned with negotiating spaces for African-Americans amongst a population with diverse ethnic origins. The “vast unknown lineage” which Avey wants to avow is a complex lineage of multiple beginnings.

In light of this, Avey’s further remarks that the rituals of their early marriage were as fundamental and beautiful a part of their lives as their physicality is disconcerting. Avey says that the things they did “had been as much a part of them as Jay’s wing-flared nose and his seal-brown color, and her high-riding Bantu behind… and the deep earth tones of her skin” (137). The animal imagery in this passage, in Jay’s “seal-brown color”, and the association of woman with nature, with fertile soil, seem to glorify the limiting and stereotypical definitions of the body which the novel challenges. Furthermore, the underlying suggestion of an inherent connection between physicality and culture seems awkwardly reductive. Situating African-American modes of expression as innately physical ignores the interactive processes that they actually bear witness to. Later in her journey Avey will come to assert the profound
need for a separation of spiritual identity and physicality and yet this view is based on her sorrow that she and Jerome lost touch with a spirituality that was "as much a part of them" as their physicality. On another level, however, this passage communicates that for Avey cultural expression is as important to her, as necessary for survival, as her own living, breathing body. It follows then that being disconnected from a supportive cultural environment is as serious a rupture as being disconnected from her body. That rupture is indeed what happened to Avey and Jay when the denial they fostered during their marriage resulted in a negation of individuality, not only in emotional terms, but, Avey recalls, in terms of their physicality.

Jerome Johnson did, and Avey Johnson continues to, exhibit damaged perceptions of their bodies which have resulted from the negative meanings they associate with blackness. Here the novel declares that a sense of inferiority based on a specific physicality, rooted in American justifications of slavery, continues to exert restrictions on black Americans’ ideas of themselves. Moira Gatens’ essay on corporeal representation and the body politic is relevant here for she seeks to consider whose bodies are represented within the latter and therefore permitted autonomy and access to power: “Certainly, not any human form, by virtue of its humanity, is entitled to consider itself author of or actor in the body politic.... Slaves, foreigners, women, the conquered, children, the working classes have all been excluded from political participation, at one time or another, by their bodily specificity” (Corporeal Representation in/and the Body Politic, 83). This coincides with Judith Butler’s assertion that our bodies are involved in a culturally mediated process which designates those bodies which matter and, by default, those which don’t. The way that the novel initially constructs both Jerome and Avey’s bodies clearly situates them in relation to such understandings of corporeal hegemony. These descendants of the African diaspora, finding themselves assessed as inherently inferior and subordinate on the basis of their physicality, make psychological shifts in identification that are reflected in how they perceive that physicality. The characters’ moves towards the material security they associate with white middle class acceptability go hand in hand with erasing, or alienating themselves from, blackness. It seems to Avey that
Jerome wears a mask over his face: “what almost looked like the vague, pale outline of another face superimposed on his, as in a double exposure” (131). The double exposure suggests DuBois’ concept of the double consciousness of the African-American, but Jerome seems determined not to embrace the duality and complexity of that situation but to position himself within white America.

In Avey’s eyes, Jerome has undergone what Susan Gubar would categorize as a form of racechange, a term she has coined to suggest: “the traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability... panracial mutuality” (5). Gubar explores the levels at which such shifting and ambiguous representations of color function; from highly self-conscious playfulness, through the strategic utilization of the possibilities of racechange to desperate attempts to grasp acceptability. Gubar recognizes the pitfalls inherent in focusing on the speculative, temporary or subversive aspects of racechange and, while keen to acknowledge the processes of agency and self-knowledge, she still observes that: “racial impersonation and masquerading are a destiny imposed on colonized black people who must wear the white mask - of customs and values, of norms and languages, of aesthetic standards and religious ideologies - created and enforced by an alien civilization” (38). This scenario clearly impacts Avey and Jerome as they attempt to move towards acceptance in the eyes of white society, disassociating themselves from any connection with black Americans. After Jerome’s death Avey refers to all the financial funds that he left behind as the “whole of his transubstantiated body and blood” (88). Since Jerome associated those funds with the achievement of respectability, this suggests that he also experienced a kind of death in life when his body was transubstantiated for an ideal of whiteness.

Avey too has invested so much in material wealth and superficial status that she has lost the connection with her own body and with blackness. Avey’s racechange manifests itself differently for there is no suggestion of physical whiteness, of a paling complexion. Avey sees her reflection as that of “a black woman of above average height with a full-figured yet compact body...”, but she has ceased recognizing that reflection as her own (48). It may be that Avey’s mirror image is so blandly respectable that she does not recognize any
distinguishing features there. Certainly, during the last years of her marriage to Jay, friends teased her that the couple had lost their individuality, appearing extremely familiar and rather formal. More alarmingly, it could be that Avey has so taken on board the mindset of whiteness that she does not recognize her blackness: she appears to herself as Other. Avey’s loss of connection with her own body, her inability to recognize her own mirror image, contributes to a portrait of a woman profoundly alienated from the complex possibilities of her cultural heritage.

The novel does not, however, present material wellbeing as synonymous with cultural disinheritance. It does not offer a critique of material advancement in itself, but rather when it exists at the expense of cultural identity. The novel stresses the grinding desperation of poverty and the rejection, by the white establishment, of black efforts for improvement that contribute to determined efforts to achieve and acquire at the cost of all else. It also powerfully depicts the sense of loss that Avey feels upon realizing the cost of choices made:

"Too much!" Her sudden outcry caused the darkness on the balcony to fly up for a moment like a flock of startled birds.

"Too much!" Loud, wrenching, issuing from her very center, it was a cry designed to make up for the silence of years. (138)

Avey’s refrain of “too much”, which is repeated over and over, suggests both the too much which the couple had lost and yet also the too much which they had acquired and which smothered them. With the outburst of grief which Avey experiences in the Grenada hotel room, she realizes that she and Jay had behaved “as if there had been nothing about themselves worth honoring!” (139). She comes to question how it would have been possible to acquire the means to provide for themselves and yet safeguard their heritage. The series of anguished questions she puts to herself consider the processes that allowed her and her husband to devalue themselves and be unaware of that devaluing. Her thoughts are echoed in Judith Butler’s considerations:

How does that materialization of the norm in bodily formation produce a domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation, which, in failing to qualify as the fully
human, fortifies those regulatory norms? What challenge does that excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony that might force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as “life”, lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving? (16)

Avey’s deliberations lead her to consider whether there was any way that the process of self-denigration could have been avoided or reversed and whether there is any way forward.

The answer Avey arrives at is the need to possess the four key qualities of awareness, vigilance, strength and distance. That final quality resonates with the refrain that runs through the novel, for Avey feels that “a certain distance of the mind and heart had been absolutely essential” and she thinks of her great-aunt’s grandmother whose body was settled in Tatem but whose mind had gone with the Ibos (139). This suggests the importance of being spiritually rooted in one’s heritage and keeping material gain strictly for the benefit of the material body. Yet this conflicts with the idea of a connection between heritage and physicality that other parts of the novel propose. It is Avey’s body that signals that something is wrong, even when her conscious mind is unperceptive, and, although she has trouble defining exactly what the inherent qualities were in the rituals of her early married years, “in a way that went beyond words, that spoke from the blood, she knew” (137). The idea of embodied cultural memory arises again when Avey meets a mentor in the person of Joseph Lebert. He too has memories of Africa “that had come down to him in the blood” (178). The novel gives great significance to the idea of rootedness in a cultural identity and to the body as a channel through which to reconnect to that heritage. Yet in response to the dilemma of preventing the initial distancing from heritage, the novel posits a clear distinction between mind and body. These shifting perspectives indicate an anxiety in the novel between situating the body as a site of cultural assertion and acknowledging the potential reductiveness of that situation.

In light of the association of a specific body with certain cultural memories, the ensuing depiction of Avey’s return to an unmediated state of being creates further inconsistencies in the portrayal of the body in this novel. Avey, still on Grenada, awakes from
a night of grieving feeling that the process has left her cleansed of previous emotional strife. The novel here posits the idea that such a regeneration, an opportunity for rebirth, is possible. Avey finds that: “her mind... had been emptied of the contents of the past thirty years... so that she had awakened with it like a slate that had been wiped clean, a tabula rasa upon which a whole new history could be written” (151). The strength of the imagery is powerful here, indicating the extent to which Avey needs to overcome thirty years of cultural denial in order to recover her sense of self. It is interesting, however, that at the age of sixty-four Avey only needs to shed thirty years of memory in order to return to a state of innocence. This assumes that at the beginning of her marriage Avey’s Afro-Caribbean/American sense of self was an unconstructed self. This issue is complicated by later developments in the novel which propose that it is also possible for Avey to purge her body and return to a state of uninscribed physicality. Such a situation is a highly debatable one, opening up questions about the extent to which the body can ever exist as a ‘clean slate’. Before arriving at that state of innocence, however, she undergoes further traumatic experiences of catharsis.

After leaving the hotel Avey wanders out into a physical landscape which echoes her mental state. She roams along the beach, a long stretch of sand untouched by human presence. There is an Edenic quality about this landscape which reinforces the implication of a return to innocence. Avey walks for hours until she stumbles on a wooden shelter, a rum shop, where she encounters Lebert Joseph, a charismatic old man whose attitude and questions intrigue and confuse her. Their conversation focuses on the annual excursion of “out-islanders” back to the island of Carriacou for celebrations to honor the ancestors, a trip Lebert is enthusiastically preparing for. He talks with enthusiasm about those making the trip who can still identify the African nations of their ancestors and recollect remnants of their songs and stories. His identification with this history is echoed in his appearance: he presents a countenance with lines “like the scarification marks of a thousand tribes” (161). Despite her initial indignation and confusion in response to his horror that she lacks knowledge of African stories and rituals, his obvious sorrow at her situation propels Avey to confide in him. She is initially resistant to his determined pleas that she accompany him on the excursion, to
discover her own ancestral connections, but she agrees to go when thoughts of returning
‘home’ instead bring back the intense discomfort in her stomach.

On board the schooner, en route to Carriacou, Avey has deviated far from the isolated
and stifling luxury of the cruise ship. She is surrounded by women who remind her of the
venerable old women of her mother’s church and, sitting supported by them, her mind
wanders back to that time. The sermon Avey remembers is crucially relevant to her current
situation and, as the schooner rocks harder, she becomes more and more troubled by the
words she remembers. The preacher’s admonishment, to roll away the stones that have buried
the spirit, pervades Avey’s consciousness and she becomes seized by a terrifying fit of
vomiting, her body contorted and wracked by a series of convulsions. Her sickness is
unsparing:

She vomited in long loud agonizing gushes. As each seizure began her head
reared back and her body became stiff and upright on the bench.... Then, as her
stomach heaved up she would drop forward and the old women holding her would
have to tighten their grip as the force of the vomiting sent her straining out over the
railing.... (204-5)

To Avey’s horror, when she finally finishes retching, the discomfort moves down into her
bowels and she experiences uncontrollable diarrhoea. Avey’s extreme affliction is clearly a
purging of the intense bloatedness she has been suffering, brought about by her swallowing of
false values.

Lying in the schooner’s deckhouse, recovering from her affliction, Avey has an
intense sensation that indicates the potential she now possesses to reconnect with her past.
Apart from the dirty pallet mattress on a shelf of planks which is Avey’s bed, “the rest was
darkness, a fetid heat and the airlessness of a hold” (208). In this environment, floating in and
out of consciousness, Avey becomes aware of another presence: “she had the impression as
her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless dark.
A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she
was” (209). Avey’s experience is momentarily synonymous with that of slaves during the
middle passage. This moment is pivotal in Avey’s transition from disavowal to acceptance. Having purged herself of the violation of false values, and allowed real sensation to breach her barricades of denial, Avey finds that strong and vital recollections emerge. The first ‘memory’ that surfaces is the earliest possible memory relating to the experience of African-Americans. It is a collective rather than individual memory that Avey experiences, initiated by physical experience, and itself a memory of the body. Avey’s profoundly disturbing illness conveys the extent of the damage resulting from cultural dislocation created by the forced transition of Africans to America.

When Avey arrives on the island the earlier depiction of her mind as a clean slate is reinforced by a parallel depiction of her physicality: “Her body under the sheet covering her had remained motionless. Flat, numb, emptied-out, it had been the same as her mind when she awoke yesterday morning, unable to recognize anything and with the sense of a yawning hole where her life had once been” (214). In the context of Avey’s journey to Carriacou, for a celebration to honor the ancestors, the process of her mind becoming a tabula rasa, and her body, in conjunction, being “emptied out”, is situated as a positive process. It is presented as a return to a place of potential and recovery. However, the novel’s construction of Avey’s being as a blank, a “yawning hole”, risks evoking damaging perceptions of black women as negligible; people without autonomy. Mae G. Henderson in an analysis of Toni Morrison’s Beloved, discusses Sethe’s body as one that has been painfully inscribed by white male domination. Her body has been scared by a white man’s whip, to punish her for speaking. A white woman and a black man both offer readings of the marks on her body, but as black women neither she nor Baby Suggs, who helps clean the wounds, have responsibility for making the inscription, or the ability to read it. Henderson comments:

The presumption is, of course, that black women have no voice, no text, and consequently no history. They can be written and written upon precisely because they exist as the ultimate Other whose absence or (non)being only serves to define the being or presence of the white or male subject. The black woman, symbolizing a kind of double negativity, becomes a tabula rasa upon which the racial/sexual identity of
Henderson equates the notion of black woman as tabula rasa with the perception of black woman as non-being. This places the idea of a black woman’s body as clean slate as a root of the problem, rather than the first step towards a solution. Yet Marshall’s imagery here could be read as challenging such conceptions by reworking the understanding of a tabula rasa as a space where others can place inscriptions. The literal translation of a *tabula rasa* as an erased tablet draws attention to the very inscriptions of domination the novel is concerned with. The experience of purging has erased those white hegemonic inscriptions and allows Avey to begin a process of drawing on her own cultural resources.

Beyond questioning the association of a black woman’s body with a *tabula rasa* though, there is a need to query the plausibility of the latter at all. The possibility of bodies existing as places of unmediated physicality is a point much debated in contemporary theories of corporeality. Judith Butler has devoted considerable attention to elucidating the extent of the cultural construction of bodies and she resists the idea that there exists at some point a ‘natural’ body that lies outside of, or prior to, culture. In fact, in her study, *Bodies That Matter*, Butler challenges the concept of constructivism, on the grounds that it assumes the existence of an unconstructed surface upon which culture acts. Early in her discussion she poses a set of questions, in relation to the rethinking of the oppositional constructions of sex and gender, that are helpful in considering the depiction in Marshall’s work of a body returned to a state of innocence:

> I want to ask how and why “materiality” has become a sign of irreducibility.... Is materiality a site or surface that is excluded from the process of construction, as that through which and on which construction works?... What occupies this site of unconstructed materiality? And what kinds of constructions are foreclosed through the figuring of this site as outside or beneath construction itself? (28)

In Marshall’s novel the description of Avey’s mind and body as a *tabula rasa* upon which a new history can be written clearly perpetuates the idea of the body as a site of unconstructed materiality upon which culture inscribes itself. Avey’s experience of purging supposedly
wiped clean damaging inscriptions of whiteness, literally the inscriptions of white chalk upon a black slate, and allowed her to return to her essential state. Appropriate cultural inscriptions can now be applied, but applied to what? The paradoxical implication is of a specific radicalized and gendered tabula rasa. This contradiction in terms indicates some confusion about the extent to which Avey’s identity results from cultural mediation or from certain intrinsic qualities. This dilemma is extended when the story unfolds to reveal not necessarily the writing of a new personal history but the restoring, through a process of physical cleansing and healing, of a collective memory that had been lost. Avey’s body is not, it seems, a space which can be inscribed upon, but one where embodied memories can resurface. Avey’s reconnection with her body, her awakening to physical sensation, triggers a series of memories from throughout her life that help her recontextualize her experiences. It also triggers, however, the surfacing of collective memories of an African past.

The task of restoring Avey’s memory is now taken up by the third in a line of her spiritual mentor’s, Rosalie Parvay, Lebert’s daughter. The theme of the body as a site of memory is elaborated here for it is through Rosalie’s touching of Avey’s body, while helping her to bathe, that her sedimented memory is shifted, stirred up and rises to the surface. The cleansing seems like a ceremonial process as Rosalie first washes and then oils one limb at a time, while singing a rhythmic chant. Avey is being attended to as though she is a helpless newborn, perpetuating the idea of rebirth, of beginning again. When Rosalie has finished washing Avey she begins an even more intensified process of massaging her legs. She gives her whole attention to vigorously kneading Avey’s thighs, “as if challenged by the sight of the flesh there, which had grown thick and inert...” (223). Gradually, the work that Rosalie is doing begins to take effect and Avey senses the return of feeling in her body, until her whole being is overtaken with an intensely powerful response:

The warmth, the stinging sensation that was both pleasure and pain passed up through the emptiness at her center. Until finally they reached her heart. And as they encircled her heart and it responded, there was the sense of a chord being struck. All the tendons, nerves and muscles which strung her together had been struck a
powerful chord, and the reverberation could be heard in the remotest corners of her body. (224)

This process of restoring energy to the body, carefully, limb by limb, until the whole body responds, is a highly suggestive play on the process of re-membering. It seems that both Avey’s body and memory needed reconstructing, piece by piece. The return of connection with the body is directly linked with the return of memory. Mae G. Henderson engages the suggestiveness of re-membering in her discussion of the body as historical text in Toni Morrison’s Beloved. She extends Morrison’s creation and use of the term re-memory to explore the process by which the characters transcend the, literally, haunting memories of the past, especially the psychological dismemberment of slavery. The process of re-memory “functions to re-collect, re-assemble, and organize into a meaningful sequential whole through...the process of narrativization” (71). Significantly, after the cleansing experience Avey tells Lebert: “Your daughter has been putting me back together again” (229). The memories which surface for Avey begin to put her experiences in a context that will eventually allow her to tell her own story.

The process of recovering her memories begins, even before Rosalie has touched Avey, when, lying in the bed, “emptied out”, recollections are initiated by her surroundings. The bare, sparse furniture of the room reminds her of the off-casts her parents had to make do with. She recalls the chagrin that her mother felt upon receiving her possessions second hand from people Avey’s father worked for. Yet she also recalls the comforting associations that became attached to the furniture as they made it their own. When Rosalie arrives in the middle of her reverie Avey realizes that this same woman had attended to her during the night, but that she had confused her presence with that of other significant women from her life. At various moments Rosalie reminded her of her mother, the nurse at the hospital where she gave birth and, thirdly, the towering figure of her great-aunt. Recollections of her aunt surface again as Rosalie begins to bathe Avey. This is because the galvanized wash tub Rosalie is using reminds Avey of the tub that was used for the weekly washing when she stayed in Tatem. The memory becomes so powerful that it becomes Avey’s reality once more.
“The memory took over, and for long minutes she was the child in the washtub again” (221). When Rosalie begins the massage, Avey is reminded not of her own childhood but of her experience as a mother tending babies. She remembers the times in Halsey street when they were small, massaging their bodies and admiring their perfection. Finally when Rosalie returns life to the “sluggish flesh” on her thighs Avey has erotic memories of her early years with Jay before their relationship was brutalized and deadened by their efforts to get ahead. The process of remembering puts Avey in touch with memories that confirm a continuity of nurturing and support, which she received both from family and community and which she passed on to her children. These memories bear witness not to the importance of financial success for the individual but of a person’s existence in a context which affirms and sustains them.

After this restorative experience Avey is accepting of traditions she had previously found ‘demented’. The lighted candle and the ear of corn left for the Old Parents remind Avey of the plates of food left by the coffin at funerals in Tatem, as she experiences “another long forgotten fragment drifting up to imprint itself... on the empty slate of her mind” (225). At the celebration for the ancestors held that same evening, the sounds of the music and the rhythms of the dancing have a similar effect on Avey as the bathing: they return to her consciousness memories of personal and community rituals that she now has a context for. Listening to the powerful rhythms of the music at the ‘Beg Pardon’ Avey finds herself drawn more and more into the dancing, as her body seems to remember instinctively what to do. At first the movement is simple and slight: “Her feet of their own accord began to glide forward, but in such a way they scarcely left the ground” (248). The steps she takes recall those of the Ibos walking back to Africa, because she treads cautiously “as if the ground under her was really water” and as if to test whether it would take her weight (248). She gradually gains confidence with the dance and as she focuses on the movement the present time fades away and she becomes transported by her memory to a scene in Tatem. She situates herself in a past moment standing with her great-aunt watching a group of worshippers performing a dance, The Ring Shout, in their church. The key element of the dance at Tatem and at Carriacou is
that the soles of the feet do not leave the floor. During the dance the performers must remain grounded, for this is a dance “designed to stay the course of history” (250). In fact the shuffling steps are not supposed to be a dance, but to Avey, watching as a young child, it had “felt like dancing in her blood, so that under cover of the darkness she performed in place the little rhythmic trudge” (35). She could not enter the church and join the community in their ceremony because her aunt was in voluntary exile after an argument with church members. Carried away with herself, Cuney had once crossed her feet in the dancing and overstepped the significant limits of rootedness set for the ritual. Indignant at the temporary exclusion that resulted, Cuney refused ever to return to the Church. So although Cuney stands as a recurring symbol of Avey’s need to reconnect with her heritage she also stands as a reminder of Avey’s childhood desire to belong within the community.

This aspect of Cuney’s role has been repeatedly misread by critics. In otherwise insightful and illuminating commentaries Gay Wilentz, Keith Sandiford and Barbara Frey Waxman all wrongly associate Cuney, rather than the church congregation, with the dance Avey is so pleased to remember. They also emphasize the limiting authority of the church in relation to the empowering potential of the individual. Actually, Avey “used to long to give her great-aunt the slip” and join the dancers in the church who were performing the Ring Shout (248). These misreadings impose a false unity on the novel’s portrayal of Avey’s cultural reawakening. The cultural knowledge Avey reconnects with does not have one unified origin but a number of sources: different people and groups who have clung to disparate stories and events, attaching their own significance to them. From her aunt Avey received the knowledge of the Ibo legend and her ancestral name. From the people of Tatem she received a knowledge of ritual dance and a sense of groundedness and community. In this context Avey’s comment to Lebert that “Your daughter has been putting me back together again” is given renewed significance. As Avey gets in touch with the separate parts of her body; the soles of the feet, the limbs, the stomach, and celebrates their functioning as a whole, so too she reconnects with different elements of her diaspora heritage.

As Avey becomes increasingly a part of the dancing group she equates the Tatem
Ring Shouters with the out-islanders on Carriacou and, continuing the metaphor of the body, feels that “the elderly Shouters in the person of the out-islanders had reached out their arms like one great arm and drawn her into their midst” (249). In an image that communicates the process of separate elements forming a whole Avey’s sense of joining the body of the community is conveyed. This collectivity is extended further when Avey re-experiences a feeling of connection that has occurred at other important moments in her life. She first experienced the sensation as a young girl, waiting on a wharf with the neighborhood community in New York and also in Tatem, when she felt linked with those around her by slender but strong threads emanating from their hearts and navels. This was not a sensation of bondage or restriction but of energy, connection and support. These were significant moments not only because Avey had a powerful feeling of community, but because she felt it in terms of her physicality. This feeling of being joined by these threads had returned when Avey was waiting for the boat trip to Carriacou and returns now during the dancing: “suddenly, as if she were that girl again... she felt the threads streaming out from the old people around her.... From their seared eyes. From their navels and cast-iron hearts. And their brightness as they entered her spoke of possibilities and becoming...” (249).

This feeling of belonging intensifies in turn the exuberance of her dancing. Not only does her body respond to the music but it seems to contain within it the knowledge of how to dance, an embodied memory of the movements: “Just as her feet of their own accord had discovered the old steps, her hips under the linen shirtdress slowly began to weave from side to side on their own, stiffly at first and then in a smooth wide arc as her body responded more deeply to the music...”(249). As the dancing continues Avey experiences the “sudden unleashing of her body” and a strange thing happens (250). The people in the crowd notice her in a different way and then in turn start bowing towards her. Lebert begins the action when he offers her “a profound, solemn bow that was like a genuflection” and then one after another people file past her to do the same (250). One woman stops to introduce herself and stops to ask Avey her name. For the first time in years Avey gives the name her aunt had chosen, in the way she had taught her to say it: “Avey, short for Avatara” (251).
Avey’s full name suggests the idea of an avatar, meaning the manifestation of a deity or the embodiment of a concept. With her name shortened its signification was obscured; its power abbreviated. Her acknowledgment of her name returns the power to connect with the past. Such an invocation appears to have occurred when Avey’s dancing figure summons recognition and adulation. This incident and Avey’s claiming of her birth name reinforces the notion of Avey’s body as a repository of memory. She embodies the concept of an African past lost and the longing to reclaim it. This notion of Avey as an avatar, of embodying an ancestral figure is also interesting in the context of her strong sensation of connection via threads from her navel, which she experiences during the dancing. This image carries echoes of pregnancy, reinforcing the perception that Avey carries another life within her; a life which will carry elements of the past into the future.

Embodied memory is also invoked by the effect of the music at the Beg Pardon. The powerful chord that reverberated out from Avey’s heart and through her body at the culmination of Rosalie’s massage, prompting the surfacing of bodily memory, is now echoed by the powerful sounds of the notes played at the celebration. These notes seem to emanate from the “bruised still-bleeding innermost chamber of the collective heart” (245). The music conveys the essence of the community’s “subliminal memories” which are more enduring than the history of pain from which they have come (245). Avey too seems to experience these subliminal messages. Yet insisting that a certain body has encoded within it a certain set of cultural memories proffers an awkwardly reductive notion of identity. There are clear moments during the novel when Avey’s knowledge of Africa is situated not in lived cultural experience but seems inherent to her biology, as embodied memory that comes to her across the generations. Cynthia J. Davis is alert to the problematic perception of women as more ‘bodily’ than men and of black women as more ‘bodily’ than white women: “since the ideal white woman was virtually (and virtuously) bodiless, her black counterpart came to be defined as ‘body’ and little else” (391). Here such an idea is extended to black women as embodying specific racial memory. Yet the novel does go beyond a one-sided exhibition of cultural retrieval. The shifting and seemingly anxious attitudes, about the implications of
identity rooted in physicality, acknowledge the complexities of bodily interactions with society. Avey’s response to her newly revived sense of self moves beyond a simplistically essentializing reaction to diaspora identity. Instead, Avey’s contact with remnants of African ritual adds another dimension to the mediation of an African-American identity.

To explore this, it is interesting to return to the occasion when Avey becomes one with the groaning hordes held in misery below deck on the slave ships. The purging that Avey endures leaves her open to this memory of her collective ancestors’ suffering; to experiencing this time slippage which connects her with the original journey of separation. This revelation occurs to Avey while she is on a journey which reverses the original experience of psychological and physical separation from the homeland. Abena Busia emphasizes Avey’s journey as a symbolic reversal of the original slave passage in her discussion of Marshall’s novel. As one of the most easterly of the Caribbean islands, and therefore physically closest to Africa, Busia argues that Avey’s journey “reverses the location of the promised land, which now, rather than being the United States as represented in the prosperity of the plantations or, today, the Fulton Street of Jerome’s success, becomes Africa as represented by Carriacou” (207). This reversal of the location of the promised land makes clear the falsity of the idea of America as an arcadia for the people of the African diaspora. The novel, though, does not propose a literal return to Africa, but rather a return to America with a renewed awareness of African origins.

The experience of dancing is the culmination of the process of illness, purging and cleansing that restores Avey’s recognition of her own body and all the implications that it carries for her in contemporary American society. Avey’s response to this awareness is not to seek a place in an idealized vision of Africa, but to acknowledge the complex origins of her heritage and to return to America and tell the stories of her history. In this way the novel manages to avoid what Paul Gilroy finds a problematic perspective. In his introduction to his study of diaspora culture The Black Atlantic he states: “modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately
approached via the homonym routes" (19). Avey comes to understand her own identity through a series of journeys, physical and emotional, literal and symbolic, that help her piece together the elements which contribute to her sense of herself as an African-American in the late twentieth century.

Avey does not recover a complete or unadulterated knowledge of African ceremony and ritual, far from it. It is made clear that the celebrations she takes part in, and the memories she recovers, offer only fragments of an African heritage. Avey may have been put back together physically and emotionally, but the African originated practices she encounters on Carriacou provide just the “bare bones”. This provides her with a strong supporting framework, but she must flesh out her own identity with a lifetime’s cultural references. Avey feels initially disconcerted by the stark, makeshift nature of the scene that greets her when she arrives for the Carriacou fete. Having watched the small group of old and fragile people dance for their lost African ways and their children spread far and wide across the world, the reality of the situation dawns on her: “All that was left were a few names of what they called nations which they could no longer even pronounce properly, the fragments of a dozen or so songs, the shadowy forms of long-ago dances and rum kegs for drums. The bare bones. The burnt-out ends” (240). Avey does not pity these people, however, but feels awe and respect for their determination to preserve their heritage against the odds. Furthermore, their fete livens up when they begin the creole dances. These acknowledge not a specific traceable connection with African groups but a general ancestral connection. The diaspora journey broke links, erased distinctions and dislocated identities until all that remains left to claim is a general association. The younger people who now join the dancing, swell the numbers at the celebration, and lift the mood of the event, are motivated by a longing to be included in this repudiation of the loss their ancestors sustained.

After the event Lebert is still keen to identify Avey’s specific African ancestral group. She however is more concerned with her return to Grenada in the first stage of flying back to America. It is the United States that is more real to her than Carriacou, for passing over the island in the plane it seems “more a mirage rather than an actual place” (254). Yet her visit to
the island has irrevocably altered her perspective and, as she flies, she considers how she would explain her new-found understanding to others. The two aspects of her personal and collective history that she is most keen to tell are, significantly, related to balancing the material needs of the body and recalling a cultural heritage which counters attempts to denigrate and deny that body. Avey wants to tell those who are “unaware, unprotected, lacking memory” of her ancestor’s perspective of a body grounded in Tatem but a mind “long gone with the Ibos” (255). In conjunction with this she wants to recount her own memory of dancing to jazz and blues, during the early years of her marriage, on a wooden floor that felt “like rich and solid ground under her” (254). The novel’s conclusion, then, posits a solution to Avey’s crisis of cultural disinheritance, that calls attention to the plural origins of African-American culture. However, although much of the novel proposes that cultural identity has a certain grounding in physicality, its conclusion, by repeating her ancestor’s refrain, remains anxious about such a grounding. The shifting approaches to physicality within the novel, therefore, communicate powerfully the impact of cultural disinheritance created by the African diaspora. In Marshall’s novel the body, as a source of collective memory, functions as a crucial symbol of the need to discover, to recall, the self, outside of hegemonic social and political prescriptions. Yet the text also imparts an astute awareness of the dangers, for black Americans, of focusing on corporeal locatedness in a society whose ruling classes designate blackness as subordinate. Despite Avey’s search for a culturally complete self the novel is unable to reconcile two very different understandings of bodily existence. Yet through this irreconcilability, as much as through the depiction of cultural reclamation, the novel exposes a pivotal feature of the diaspora experience it is concerned with relating.
Chapter Two

Uncovering Whiteness: Representations of Ideal Southern Womanhood and White Identity in Ellen Gilchrist’s *Net Of Jewels*

There are a number of key elements which appear repeatedly in Ellen Gilchrist’s characterisations of white women: their stunning physical attractiveness and vitality; their openly expressed sexuality, and their abuse of their bodies through addictive behaviour such as excessive dieting, alcoholism or obsessive exercise. Such self-abuse would seem to be at odds with the women’s vitality and confidence. Emotional and physical damage, resulting from the women’s frenetic use of drugs, alcohol and exercise in a bid to control their bodies, is a recurring issue. The tension created between the women’s sense of themselves as attractive and intelligent and their extreme anxiety about their bodies draws attention to the insupportable contradictions at the heart of constructions of flawless white femininity. Such preoccupation with body image is a central aspect of Gilchrist’s portrayal, in her novel *Net of Jewels*, of Rhoda Manning, a southern woman of the white elite. A reading of Rhoda’s physicality in the novel, in the context of white embodiment rooted in ante-bellum ideology, reveals not only explicit concerns about femininity and bodily practice, but also implicit assumptions about the superiority and transcendent physicality of whiteness. This chapter will argue that the bodily practices and beliefs that engage Rhoda are founded in a racial construction of whiteness which, in this novel, is informed by the desire to retain the specific power structure set in place by the institution of slavery.

The analysis of Rhoda’s preoccupation with her body needs to be read in the context of her family’s inherited Southern aristocratic ideals. Their continuing influence is revealed in the relationships Rhoda has with her parents, especially her father, and with her maids. The significance and influence of the Southern patriarchs are frequently emphasised in Gilchrist’s stories. The importance of the white male head of the family in the women’s lives is made clear. The women are full of admiration for these men who are consistently portrayed as
handsome, powerful and extremely wealthy. In *Net of Jewels* such a relationship emphasises Rhoda’s place as a direct descendant of the southern white elite, accepting of the code of chivalry and taking for granted the men’s role as protectors. Her privileged social position is accentuated by the presence of house servants, with whom she claims to have a strong emotional bond. However Rhoda takes the maids’ attention for granted, undermining claims of sisterhood with her patronising attitude. The text, unnervingly, ignores or denies the maids’ required subservience and the power imbalance which it creates in the women’s relationships. With the emphasis in the novel on Rhoda’s familial wealth, and her family’s social standing within the southern elite, the characterisation of the maids echoes the sentimentalised role of white mistress of the household attended by a loyal slave. In this context then it is also understood that the women are the descendants of southern belles and plantation mistresses.

Ironically in *Net of Jewels*, the heroine, Rhoda Manning, declares “‘I wouldn’t be caught dead being a Southern belle’”. (250) In reality there are many aspects of that role that she does attempt to epitomise, and the damage she does to her body in the process is frequently life threatening. The novel is pervaded with frequent references to Rhoda’s physicality and these references are often concerned with destruction and damage. Rhoda talks about hatred of fat, taking prescription amphetamines, punishing exercise, frequent states of alcoholic stupor, obsessive sex, hospital visits, an abortion, caesarean sections, loss of blood, pain, anxiety and frustration. This refrain of disturbing physical experience is set in a context of southern genteel society; warm evenings, families on the porch, crepe myrtle blossoms and humid moonlit summer nights. This sheltered setting is a contrast to tales of dangerous Klan meetings and civil rights protests. Rhoda’s anxiety and naïveté about such situations always cause her to turn and retreat into what she perceives as the safety of the privileged patriarchal structure. Yet it is within this circle of influence that Rhoda is confined to the damaging limits of socially constrained bodies.

While Rhoda does not consciously frame her concern with her body in terms of embodied whiteness, it becomes apparent that her perspective on the world, (and thus her corporeal place in it) is informed by ingrained ideas about white universality. As a white
woman Rhoda understands that she must transcend her messy, dirty physicality to achieve a slender, pristine radiance which will qualify her for acceptance within the ranks of the white southern elite. Whereas Avey Johnson’s search for a sense of identity led her to a belief in internally embodied memory, Rhoda understands her body as constantly reflected in the beauty of the world around her. While Avey feels the need to reclaim her physicality Rhoda aims to transcend corporeality. Her aim for purity is set in the context of the cold beauty of her northern European ancestors who wielded economic and social power over land and people during slavery. Their own qualities are understood as part of the natural essence of a luminous universe of which they are therefore the rightful inheritors. The flaws in this notion of inherent white beauty and superiority are revealed by the intense difficulties Rhoda experiences in maintaining her beauty; her body’s cravings for what she understands as illicit pleasures; her dependence on black women to assist her, and help define her, and her hierarchy of whiteness according to class.

Tracing Rhoda’s sense of her own embodiment, in relation to racial constructions of whiteness, offers a new layer of understanding to the analyses of southern womanhood that have been the main focus of critical work on Ellen Gilchrist. There is by no means a large body of critical work on Gilchrist, especially in relation to her copious output. The only recurring theme, among a group of articles with a diverse focus, is a concern with Gilchrist’s negotiations around the traditional figure of the southern woman. Generally speaking these articles acknowledge the serious ambiguity of Gilchrist’s characters towards the figure of the southern belle: their desire for the physical perfection and material security promised by compliance with the myth, yet also their flamboyant rejection of the limits placed on them by social expectations. Dorie LaRue offers an ascerbic commentary on the tendency for Gilchrist’s central characters to lean far more towards the former than the latter. She expresses exasperation, particularly in relation to Rhoda Manning, at the characters’

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inabilities to move beyond the self-deception and abuse connected with their obedience to this archaic role model. An aspect of these characterisations, discussed in more depth in some articles than in others, is the representation of the ceaseless round of excessive bodily practices that are involved with creating and maintaining the illusion of the belle’s flawlessness. Most recently Tonya Stremlau Johnson has traced the connection between the inconsistencies in Rhoda’s accounts of her life, in stories as well as Net of Jewels, and her accounts of her body’s condition. Johnson argues that management of her stories echoes her management of her body: both are adjusted according to what she perceives is required.

None of the discussions of Gilchrist’s accounts of southern womanhood, however, sets the construction of the women’s identity or physicality within a broader context of the construction of whiteness. While noting the ways in which women attempt to control, and succeed in abusing, their bodies, and setting this in relation to the continuing influence of southern patriarchal social rules, this perspective is not broadened to incorporate the notions of whiteness that are central to that social arrangement. This chapter therefore offers an extension to perspectives on Gilchrist’s work and understandings of fictional representations of whiteness. Tracing assumptions about embodied white superiority creates an awareness of the ways that Gilchrist’s characters persist with a fixed mindset.

In recent years there has been an increasing awareness of the importance of acknowledging racial constructions of whiteness, and a growing commentary on its racial categorisation. Critical attention has been drawn to the ways that whiteness is constructed by default. Frequently whiteness is understood, without any express statement of that understanding, as the standard of normality against which others are marked as different. As Alistair Bonnet has commented: “the traditional racial construction of ‘whiteness’ as the ‘norm’, the standard of humanity, is made even more apparent, and pernicious, as its blank, silent presence is inserted next to the ‘colourful’, ‘eccentric’ categories of ethnicity” (176). Much of the evolving critical work concentrates on highlighting this problem and pinpointing
the ways, and contexts, in which white identity is constructed as ideal.\(^2\) Extending from this is the awareness that the assumption of white neutrality is inherently associated with moral and aesthetic values which stress the superiority of white identity.

Yet while there is a constantly expanding body of work, from a variety of disciplines, on social constructions of white identity, specific literary enquiries remain relatively few. Innovative studies of whiteness like Theodore Allen’s *The Invention of the White Race* (1994), David Roediger’s *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (1994) and Ruth Frankenberg’s *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (1993) all examine the ways in which notions of whiteness orchestrate social groupings. They interrogate the ways that lines of inclusion and exclusion are drawn around whiteness in relation to such issues as gender, class and nationality. There have been far fewer lengthy studies of textual delineations of whiteness. What is of interest here is an examination of how whiteness is represented: how white superiority is created in terms of literary images which insist on a certain embodiment as exclusively white, while paradoxically presenting whiteness as transcending physicality.

Critics adopt different strategies for examining images of whiteness and the spaces whiteness occupies. Some critical perspectives start at the boundaries and look at the construction of whiteness through a reading of mixed race characterisations, or images of whiteness in relation to blackness. Harryette Mullen has taken the “mechanism of passing” as a model for the cultural production of whiteness. She argues that passing undermines the power balance between margin and centre and that: “the center exploits the energy of the margin, augmenting and renewing itself as the racially ambiguous are drawn to the self-validating power of the center to define itself as white and therefore pure, authentic, and ‘naturally’ dominant” (74). Toni Morrison examines the premise of whiteness not in opposition to blackness but through the lens of white authors’ creations of black characters, with the view that “the subject of the dream is the dreamer” (17). Morrison argues that the

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\(^2\) See also Friedman (1995) and Hartigan (1997).
characterisations of blackness in white authored texts act as self-projection. This creative act is: “an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly consciousness. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity” (17). Both these ways of approaching whiteness are helpful to a reading of *Net of Jewels* in terms of the characterisations of maids set in relation to Rhoda. It is also important and productive to explore the representation of whiteness in itself and the specific associations with white corporeality. Richard Dyer’s critical investigations, particularly his book *White* (1997), have provided an invaluable starting point in this respect.

Dyer’s interrogation of constructions of whiteness, while focused on film and photographic images, has much to offer this reading of *Net of Jewels*, in terms of the constitutive elements of whiteness it identifies. What is especially interesting and paradoxical in relation to understanding the racial construction of white corporeality, is that whiteness is assumed not to be reducible to the merely corporeal. This assumption arises from the idea that white people are distinguished by an inner spiritedness and a superior mentality that situates mind over body: “Above all, the white spirit could both master and transcend the white body, while the non-white soul was a prey to the promptings and fallibilities of the body” (Dyer 23). Dyer emphasises that this is a relational understanding of whiteness and blackness: “Black people can be reduced (in white culture) to their bodies and thus to race, but white people are something else that is realised in and yet is not reducible to the corporeal, or racial” (14). This perspective relates to associations of whiteness with light and with the celestial: an association that takes whiteness out of and above bodily existence. An awareness of the assumed transcendence of whiteness helps contextualise the imagery which constructs Rhoda’s body in this novel.

Even as whiteness is constructed as surpassing the body, this is achieved through the representation of very specific images associated with white bodies. Richard Dyer discusses
these with regards to white genealogy, and their origin in Caucasian myth, which insists on a strong connection between physicality and environment. Dyer outlines the connections between the cold mountain climate of Northern Europe, assumed Caucasian temperament and physical characteristics:

Such places had a number of virtues: the clarity and cleanliness of the air, the vigour demanded by the cold, the enterprise demanded by the harshness of the terrain and climate, the sublime, soul-elevating beauty of the mountain vistas, even the greater nearness to God above and the presence of the whitest thing on earth, snow. All these virtues could be seen to have formed the white character, its energy, enterprise, discipline and spiritual elevation, and even the white body, its hardness and tautness... its uprightness... its affinity with (snowy) whiteness. (21)

All of these features are present in Rhoda’s references to her body, her family and her genealogy. Their persistence, even in the heat and humidity of the Deep South is noted.

Rhoda’s perspective on her own body and her identity as a white woman is informed by a specifically Southern set of social guidelines, yet she does not always feel comfortable with her Southern heritage. She often claims to reject southern mores, but frequently contradicts this stance when she expresses esteem for her father and, by association, the Southern patriarchy he represents. She does not always recognise the strength of the white South’s embrace. Net of Jewels covers the formative years of Rhoda’s life, growing up in the South in the fifties and sixties, narrated by Rhoda herself, looking back from the vantage point of her fifties. The novel opens with Rhoda’s return to the South. She has spent some of the years of her childhood in the North, in Illinois, but whether living in the North or the South, the attitudes that influence Rhoda’s familial interactions are inherently those of the southern white elite. Her parents’ move to Dunleith, Alabama, serves to reinforce the family’s connection with the South’s slaveholding past and its continuing influence. Even now her family’s status in terms of ownership and implied social control, is significant to Rhoda, as she states proudly that: “My Daddy’s family owns the whole county where they live” (11). At the novel’s start Rhoda says that she will recount a tale of escaping her father’s control: “[this
story] is about my setting forth to break the bonds [my father] tied me with. It took a very long time.... In the end I got free, so it sort of has a happy ending” (3). Yet throughout the novel, and at its conclusion, Rhoda relaxes into the safety of her father’s world. This safety, however, certainly in terms of her physicality, remains suspect while she abides within the confines of her father’s house and all it represents. Rhoda’s veneration of her father, and her attraction to the privilege that his position in the white southern elite offers her, are directly linked to the damage that she does to her body to conform to the standards of that elite. Her body while attended to, waited on and provided for, comes under extreme duress in order to maintain the body image demanded by parental and social standards. From the minute she sets foot in her father’s house Rhoda’s body is endangered by social pressure to maintain a certain image through denial and obsessive behaviour.

The significance of her father’s home is a refrain that runs throughout the novel and represents far more to Rhoda than bricks and mortar. In her father’s house Rhoda is living within the confines of the white Southern patriarchy and the legacy that accompanies it: “Dunleith, Alabama. I was home, in my father’s house, in the land of my father’s fathers” (335). In the discussion of constructed whiteness that follows, this attitude is significant to understandings of white genealogy. For now it stands as an indicator of the legacy of slavery, patriarchy and sense of tradition. Rhoda’s references to her family’s involvement with slavery connect past and present generations: “They had settled the land on Spanish land grants and cleared it with slave labor. They loved to read old wills in which their ancestors left slaves to each other. It made them sad to think they couldn’t keep slaves anymore…” (20). There is a disturbing flippancy here which functions not only as a mockery of those attitudes but as an attitude of disregard in itself for the centrality of slavery to Southern life; as though it was merely a whim or slight preoccupation. This attitude is reinforced by Rhoda’s later comment about her father’s difficulty in returning to “a place that was sixty percent black at a time when it was out of fashion to keep slaves” (74). The sentimentality that Rhoda describes also signals the nostalgia that constructs the “good old days” of chivalry, feminine charms and racial hierarchy. Rhoda’s comments here seem not to acknowledge the dangerous constraints
such a view continues to exert in the present.

Rhoda does express discomfort with these people and their attitudes, attempting to distance herself from her family: “I had never been comfortable with them. Never liked to visit long in Aberdeen, their stronghold in the middle of their cotton fields” (20). This assertion is seriously undercut, however, by Rhoda’s adoration of her father and her desire to please him: “I stood up beside him. He was so beautiful, so perfect, so powerful and impossible and brave” (17). Here there is a direct connection between beauty and power; beauty being an arbitrary and extremely subjective definition but linked to very real daily effects in terms of justifying the control of others. Flawless beauty and power are absolutely linked in Rhoda’s perspective and this connection directly influences her own actions. Her own attempts to emulate such beauty permanently fail, perhaps indicated by her description of her father as “impossible”. Rhoda fears that: “Nothing I would ever do would make [my father] love me” (17). It does seem that hardly anything she can do will satisfy her parents’ demands. Her achievements are swept aside to focus on her shortcomings and the latter seem entirely related to her inability to conform to a certain standard of womanhood.

Rhoda’s arrival in the South instigates the immediate reinforcing of social prescriptions relating to her body. Her mother’s first response, upon Rhoda’s arrival home, is that she is overweight. She disregards Rhoda’s excitement about having won a writing contest, to insist that Rhoda visit the doctor for some weight-control pills. While Rhoda venerates her father she scorns her mother’s concern. Kathryn Seidel has noted that in contemporary writing about the belle the daughter’s relationship with her mother is difficult because “the mothers so often embody the ethic of self-sacrifice and denial that characterize traditional southern mores” (168). Rhoda’s rejection of her mother does not help her avoid restrictive attitudes about the woman’s role, for they are even more firmly held by her father. Rhoda initially fights the idea of going on a diet, but soon gives in. She is “seduced” by her parents’ wealth and privilege and understands that she has access to it if she conforms to the standards of southern white upper-class society: “Anywhere I moved, anything I touched belonged to [Daddy]. Anything I wanted I could have. All I had to do was stay on my diet and
be ‘nice to people’ and get acquainted with North Alabama” (30). Again this seriously undermines her claim to reject her parents’ ways. Rhoda’s obsession with bodily perfection and the daily routines she takes part in to maintain it are “the mechanisms by which the subject at times becomes enmeshed in collusion with forces that sustain her own oppression” (Bordo 92). Rhoda believes that she has access to power as part of the white elite but her position as a woman within that elite negates much of that power. Rhoda is frequently in a situation where her desire to receive the privileges of white superiority is at odds with the subservient behaviour expected from her, as a woman. Anne Goodwyn Jones has elaborated on this conflict which exists for white southern women:

She found herself at the center of the paradoxes that informed her own southern culture, yet she had experience and a point of view that diverged in some ways sharply from those of her southern white father, husband, brother, and son. Caught between white supremacy and female inferiority, her loyalties to her race might well conflict with her loyalties to her sex. She was torn, too, between her love for the men and boys central in her life, her pride at what she symbolized for them, and her perhaps buried anger at the repressiveness implicit in their reverence and the fear implicit in their habit of commanding her. (24)

The price of Rhoda’s co-operation with southern patriarchal requirements of white women is physical damage. The novel depicts the extent to which Rhoda attempts to make use of the power that is permitted to her: power accessed through her body. She uses her body to gain influence, or sometimes to challenge restrictions, but the demands made on her physicality overwhelm her autonomy.

Rhoda’s determination to conform to a certain image affects all aspects of her life. She takes a prescription amphetamine, Dexedrine, to inhibit her appetite, hardly eats, and swims daily. She becomes addicted not only to the Dexedrine, but to the whole process of controlling her body. She rejects any concern about her weight expressed by those outside of her family. When her closest friend, Charles William, is so worried that he wants her to stop dieting, she rejects his concerns and says she will continue, even step up, her diet. Her
motivation is clear: “From now on I’m going to be a lady” (40). Rhoda has set herself however on a path, not of perfection, but of potential destruction. She functions in a haze of too many drugs and not enough food. At a party to welcome home Clay Morgan, the son of a family friend, she adds excessive alcohol to the equation. When Rhoda, in a state of high intoxication, crashes a car, killing Clay and giving herself concussion, the dangerous condition she is in is only too clear. Rhoda, however, does not make the connection. She is taken off Dexedrine and returns to college at the University of Alabama, where, without the assistance of diet drugs, she gives up eating altogether: “I never eat now. I starve all the time” (82). Rhoda is full of admiration for the extreme bodily practices of her college friend, May Garth, who drinks iodine daily to make herself lose weight. Rhoda’s fascinated approval is disconcerting in relation to her commentary, given in hindsight, about southern feminine ideals. The opinion is prompted by memories of May Garth, a very tall young woman: “Back then that was the social equivalent of having terminal cancer. Back then girls were supposed to look like children. Not everywhere, of course, but certainly in the culture of the Deep South” (80). From her narrator’s perspective years later, Rhoda understands that there were “very few women who could make their bodies smaller and keep them that way” (81). In the present time of the novel Rhoda has still not given up on the dream and is enthusiastic about May Garth’s actions even while aware of their danger.

Her experience at college reinforces the message she has received from her family. At her sorority house, she is summoned by her sorority ‘big sister’, instructed to watch her weight and told she has a date with a well-regarded student. Rhoda is aware of the implications of what she is being told: “Some old law student in a dark suit was coming to take me out to dinner. He was dark and tall and cold…. He wanted me to act like a lady. He wanted me to be beautiful and thin. Sophisticated and aloof, quiet and soft and perfect” (101). The term ‘lady’ reappears again and again, ever present in Rhoda’s consciousness, acting as both threat and reprimand. She has clear associations with that term as the demand to create a beautiful body and yet, paradoxically, to negate her physicality. In being aloof, soft and quiet Rhoda must withdraw: she must not make her actual presence felt but only an impression of
her perfection.

In Rhoda’s situation, adoration of the white body is not an empowering attitude, for it is a limited concept of beauty within which she must function. The essence of that beauty is control and purity. Bodily perfection is achieved by denying the body. The daily routines which Rhoda practices in her pursuit of a certain physicality are outward expressions of beliefs about white bodies and their superiority, which Rhoda’s comments reveal she has incorporated into her perspective. What underlies Rhoda’s conscious awareness of social requirements is an unconscious awareness of how whiteness is constructed simultaneously as the norm and also as an ideal to be attained. She refers to her corporeality in terms of herself as one part of a universal continuum of particles and light. Her physical existence is often described in relation to images of light, golden glow and radiance. In this way the materiality of her body is conveniently displaced by the immateriality of light. Examining these references to light draws attention to the construction of transcendent whiteness that is actually an expression of racial difference. Rhoda’s South is a place which still bears the influence of the reinforcement of these ideas during slavery. While Rhoda does describe herself as embodying certain nationally and racially specific ancestral traits, much of her understanding of her physicality demonstrates an unacknowledged internalisation of myths of general embodied whiteness and white superiority. Elements of the construction of whiteness are clearly evident in Rhoda’s descriptions of the slaveholding patriarchs of her ancestry. It also becomes evident that despite an implied belief in the ‘human’ race Rhoda actually functions in relation to clearly separate and ordered racial constructions.

Richard Dyer focuses on the use of light to construct ideal white womanhood as the purest expression of whiteness. He emphasises the representation of light as radiating from and around white women to create a sense of glow. This in turn is attributed to the historical idealisation of women as angelic, as closest to the heavens: “the white woman as angel was... both the symbol of white virtuousness and the last word in the claim that what made whites special as a race was their non-physical, indeed ethereal qualities” (127). Their continued association with light and the celestial implies that white women are the essence of that
spiritedness which has everything to do with the mind and nothing at all to do with the body.

One of the foundations of Rhoda’s understanding of white corporeality is that whiteness and light pervade her world as an indicator that all is well. A universe of light frames Rhoda’s existence, as in the following instances: “Light poured in the kitchen windows onto the brass pots... Light rang out against the brass” (138); “The sky was a brilliant blue. The sycamore trees golden in the clear fall air” (139) and “the live oak trees shaded us with their leaves, poured down oxygen and golden pollen upon our hair. The sun shone down between the leaves...” (199). Rhoda’s body is attributed the same qualities of radiance as her physical surroundings so that her body is constructed as being at home in, and a part of the universe: “I guess I was very beautiful, with my golden skin and hair... my face soft and golden in the candlelight, my terrible innocence and golden youth” (116). Rhoda’s whiteness is portrayed as part of a broader universal essence: “I did not know yet that I was made of light, of star carbon and molecules. But I gravitated always toward my source. I was always hurrying outside in the early morning to watch the light filter down through the trees” (43). She understands the basic matter of the universe, of light and of her body as interchangeable, as her golden body takes its rightful place in a world suffused with golden light. Rhoda expresses this conviction on another occasion when she seems convinced of her place in the eternity of the universe. When Rhoda and an older acquaintance, Jim, spend time star-gazing through a telescope, Rhoda is amazed by what she sees: “I looked at the vast clusters of stars, the unbelievable space and beauty of the universe” (256). Yet she is not frightened about her own place in this vastness: “It’s all so cold and far away, and beautiful. But we’re not nothing in all of that... I think our minds are very much larger than we know” (256). The images of cold beauty here, in context with other images of whiteness in the novel, imply that whiteness is at one with the universal and that white people contain the essence of a cold and beautiful eternity.

As an extension of these ideas, light and whiteness constitute all that Rhoda associates with positivity and goodness in the world. Good aspects of life are signalled by key references to whiteness: “things get started in the world and they seem so fresh and white and
hopeful...” (156). This illuminated hopefulness is a recurring image, as when Rhoda discovers her sick child is likely to recover: “Hope filled the room like snow.... Light was everywhere. Light and snow. The doctor had my baby in his arms. The doctor would save him” (286). Feelings of friendship and support also exist in this arena of light: “When my hand was slipped into his arm there was nothing in the world but light and laughter.... A radiant world was all about us” (203). Later, when the connection between light and supportive love is repeated Rhoda broadens the implications to include the love and protection of the gods: “in the light of all that love I was emboldened. I could do anything I wanted to. I was part of the pantheon. Child and friend of gods” (351). Light and love elevate Rhoda to the level of the divine. This association between light and godliness is a recurring one.

The association of Rhoda’s body with light, and the further association of whiteness and light with positive aspects of the natural world, contextualizes her body in terms of inherent goodness and superiority. Other people make this explicit in their references to her. Rhoda’s self-proclaimed intelligence is referred to as “a shaft of light” (241). On another occasion Rhoda is told that she has a light inside her and this has very positive associations. Jim Phillips, a man she is attracted to, tells her: “‘You’re a very special girl, Rhoda. There’s a light inside of you, a vibrancy’” (257). Light is both within Rhoda and about her, situating her on a continuum of light.

Rhoda’s behaviour concerning her body is focused on reducing its size and denying its demands; reducing it, that is, to its essence of purity and light. Her frequent exercise, fasting and use of drugs are the bodily practises which expose the lengths she must go to, to achieve what is supposedly her natural condition. Dyer explicates this point: “a hard, lean body, a dieted or trained one, an upright, shoulders back, unrelaxed posture... abstinence or at any rate planning in relation to appetites, all of these are the ways the white body and its handling display the fact of the body within” (23). This denial of physicality is challenged however by sexual desire, a need that must acknowledge the existence of the body and its demands. Rhoda’s active sexuality is a threat not just to lady-like restrictions placed on her,
but to the transcendence of messy physicality at the heart of constructions of whiteness. Anne Goodwyn Jones makes clear the connection between supposed sexual purity and whiteness in her commentary on Southern womanhood: “She is chaste because she has never been tempted; in some renditions she lacks sexual interest altogether. Because it is unthinkable for her to desire sex, much less sex with a black man, and because the white man protects her from the black man’s presumably uncontrollable sexual desire, her genes are pure white” (9). Looked at another way, as Dyer puts it, white women’s “very whiteness, their refinement, makes of sexuality, a disturbance of their racial purity” (29). The events of the novel indicate the power of sexual desire and the conflict created when that desire is denied or confined by social restrictions.

Rhoda is not always ill at ease with sexual expression. When she first meets Malcolm Martin she is amazed by her attraction to him: “Talk about libido. Talk about desire” (132). In direct opposition to notions of southern women’s purity Rhoda sets about fulfilling her new found sexual drive. It becomes a central focus of her existence: “Doing it was divine. The more we did it, the more I wanted to do it and the more he wanted to do it. All we wanted to do was do it” (184). There are occasions when sex is referred to openly, even explicitly, using frank language. There is often a sense of bravado: “I took off the dress and we did it. Whatever I thought doing it would be, this was more terrible and exciting and interesting and endless than anything I could have imagined and even if I was doing it wrong I wanted to go on doing it” (137). Yet the text also repeatedly shies away from an acknowledgement of the physicality of sex and returns to an insistence on a transcendent whiteness. The tendency to displace the two people’s bodies with images of light, and frame their experience in relation to a luminous universe, communicates the discomfort surrounding the confrontation with physicality demanded by sex.

Before turning to the construction of Rhoda and Malcolm’s corporeality in their sexual relationship it is revealing to compare the characterisation of Rhoda’s friend Irise Lane. Irise presents an interesting contrast to, and comment on, Rhoda’s striving for an ideal body and her accompanying anxiety about sexuality. Irise epitomises model womanhood and
also remains sexually pure and unknowing. The initial description of her emphasises her petit size, fragility and delicate white clothes:

She was very small... and she was very old-fashioned looking, like a girl out of an old picture of a perfect life. She had soft brown hair and wide eyes that could fix on you and hold. She was wearing a thin white cotton dress trimmed in lace. She put her hand upon my arm and moved nearer. I caught a whiff of roses, some divine soft smell. (25)

This description verges on caricature with its picture-book perfection. Irise hovers around the edge of Rhoda’s life and, while she embodies much of what Rhoda strives for, the characterisation is a comment on the anxiety surrounding white identity at its most fully realised. Irise is always cast as a positive and balanced person and, again, this is conveyed in terms of light: “She was all dressed up in a green corduroy jumper and a soft white blouse with puffed sleeves. Her face smiled out from her short brown hair...how much it brightened up a room to have Irise around” (128). The idea of Irise’s flawlessness is repeated most strongly in Rhoda’s assessment that: “She’s perfect. She’s always what she seems to be. Always the same. She’s a perfect little doll” (332). Yet, unlike Rhoda, or others of Rhoda’s friends, there is no insight into how she achieves this perfection or doll-like quality. Irise is not sharply defined. She is always somehow just out of focus, existing in a haze of white frocks and perfume. Neither is there any reference to her bodily practices; her daily routine of creating or maintaining herself.

So Irise’s physical existence is not directly acknowledged even while an impression is created. Neither is her body made apparent in terms of any sexual relationship. Her boyfriend, Charles William, is having an affair with another man, something of which she seems unaware. Rhoda’s attempts to discuss sexuality with Irise reveal Irise’s completely non-physical concept of ‘making love’. It is not so much that she lacks knowledge of what to do, but rather that it has not occurred to her that there is any more to it than the companionship she receives from Charles William. When Rhoda, in an anxious state about her sexual relationship with Malcolm, asks Irise what she does, Irise replies: “I don’t know.
He just tells me things. About things he’s interested in” (153). When Rhoda insists on knowing more Iris again reveals a platonic relationship: “‘We just lie around and laugh about things and listen to music if we can be at his house alone.... Then he just tells me things or I put on his kimonos and he ties them around my waist and we tell each other things’” (153).

Iris has achieved the status of ideal femininity and white ethereality so well that she is unsullied by any sexual thoughts that would acknowledge her bodily functions. Unlike Rhoda, however, she is therefore unable to perpetuate this white ideal into the next generation. As shall be seen, Rhoda’s sexuality and the process of childbirth cause her bodily anxiety, but the births of her two sons are framed in terms of reproducing white superiority.

While there is an acknowledgement of Rhoda’s sexual desires and behaviour, in contrast to the hazy void that characterises Iris’s physicality, the discomforting confrontation with Rhoda’s physicality is still alleviated, once more, by shifting the focus away from the body towards a light-filled universe. In this way sexual behaviour transcends the body and takes its place in the wider scheme of things. Rhoda’s attraction to Malcolm is translated in this way: “Now even the trees seemed sexual, locked in the ground by their roots. The sycamore leaves made golden beds upon the grass. Light coming down between the buildings seemed a sexual thrust. I looked up into Malcolm’s face. There were specks of gold in his green eyes. Gold on the freckles of his arms” (140). Sexual behaviour is also situated as one more element in the natural order of things: “Nothing hurt, we were tree and roots and earth and bird and song and music and water and divine young bodies in love with ourselves...” (194). This reference to divine bodies lifts them above the earthly into the celestial. Such divinity is repeated in other references where their attraction is placed in the realm of a light-filled universe controlled by the gods: “Electromagnetism, Aphrodite, sunspots, whatever explains such things” (188). On another occasion their sexual encounter transcends the limits of time, and seems frozen in eternity; their bodies no longer flesh and blood but marble statues: “for timeless unforgettable hours nothing seemed to exist but that room and the strange light coming in the closed curtains and the bed with us on it. It seemed to mean something so vast and endless, as though our arms and legs and bodies were made of marble
and each instant was recorded somewhere forever” (152).

The imagery here introduces a concept of timelessness which is repeated in relation to the reproduction of whiteness. In the same way that the novel veers towards constructing sexuality to transcend the physical, so too reproduction is often disassociated from limiting corporeality. This is achieved by the association of whiteness with eternity. The idea of whiteness as forever enduring is made explicit in relation to the death of Rhoda’s friend Clay. When he is killed in a car crash his death is depicted as a returning of his essence to the universe: “Nothing we did or said on that or any other day was going to stain the white radiance of eternity to which Clay had returned his colors” (67). Eternity is defined here in terms of whiteness. In this context the idea of Clay’s colours is an interesting one. The understanding of “colors” as true nature is significant here in that they are associated with unstainable “white radiance”. Clay’s true nature is connected with his whiteness and that is something which can never truly die.

As much as whiteness is here constructed as everlasting it is also depicted as a quality which is forever reproduced. In Rhoda’s thoughts on infinity she states that from one perspective you could trace “the whole history of everyone who ever was kin to you all the way back to the beginning of time” while in the other direction “is infinity of the stars” (111). Here whiteness is reproduced without need of bodies: looking back through time Rhoda imagines her heritage, but in looking to the future it continues as starlight. This coincides with Rhoda’s description of herself as made of starcarbon. Whiteness is understood as at one with a radiant universe and can therefore effortlessly repeat itself. The concept of a non-bodily reproduction of whiteness is also reinforced by Rhoda’s vision of her grandchild. On the occasion when Rhoda describes her sexual encounter with Malcolm as timeless and statuesque she also believes that she sees the face of her grandson. The generations are reproduced from an encounter which is not fixed in time or space or even in real bodies. Rhoda imagines her progeny one generation removed and so not requiring her direct involvement.

When sexuality and reproduction are such awkward issues, fears about reproducing
whiteness, and even whiteness dying out, come into play. Dyer discusses white denial of physicality as associated with a pervasive fear of death; “the desolate suspicion of non-existence” (45). If the body cannot be acknowledged in its materiality, how then can it be reproduced? Prominent in Rhoda’s thinking is the fear that she will die and this causes her great anxiety. Early on, expressing her fear of death, Rhoda describes it as akin to snuffing out the light inside her and with the light, also her power:

Death is all around us. We walk around as though we will live forever, we won’t live forever, we could die at any moment. At any moment death is stalking us, stalking our friends, anyone we love, anyone we could meet. It snuffed me like a light to think such thoughts and took my power away. (110)

Here Rhoda acknowledges her position of power and expresses fear about the end of that power. In the context of light and white embodiment in the novel the idea of death as a light going out implies loss of whiteness as loss of power.

Rhoda’s comments about being with Malcolm acknowledge her need for connection as an antidote to her fear of death: “Whatever light I followed took me straight to where the only defeat of death we know of lies” (182). She has an almost obsessive urge to be in Malcolm’s presence, in physical contact with him. On another occasion she declares: “I had to get some bonding energy to keep from thinking I was going to die” (185). While Rhoda is certainly mortal, the potential for heterosexual connection and the making of generations means that the white line will not die. This is emphasised by the connection between whiteness and eternity that the text creates. However, in relation to the construction of whiteness, physical reproduction carries with it the risk, in its acknowledgement of the need for the body, of dangerously undermining notions to white purity. This double jeopardy associated with reproduction is expressed by Rhoda’s ambivalence about pregnancy and childbirth. While she seeks sexual connection as safety from death, the resultant pregnancies and childbirth, while ensuring the continuation of the white line, reactivating her fears of death.

Rhoda has two children in quick succession very early in her marriage with Malcolm. Both pregnancy and childbirth are fraught with anxiety. Much of this is associated with
changes that her body undergoes. Her main concern after childbirth is that her body will be thin again. She has both babies by caesarean section and her thoughts after her loss of blood during the second operation are telling: "all I thought about was how much weight it would make me lose... I get the baby out of me and get my figure back at the same time. Sew me up tight, I kept muttering to the doctors. Make my stomach flat" (229). The final refrain echoes her father’s instruction to her to “suck up [her] guts” (12). Clearly the white body must not overrun its boundaries; it must be firmly disciplined and any signs of the physicality of reproduction must be covered over as though they never existed. This anxiety about reproduction is a paradox, for the new generations are of enormous importance. The novel illustrates the importance of offspring for continuing the family line and the essence of whiteness.

The significance of the children as representatives of the patriarchal lineage is evident. As Rhoda explains to the doctor about her first son: “He’s named Malcolm, of course. He’s named for his father. We always name boys for their fathers” (216). Rhoda thinks of her son only in terms of the male line: “I had given birth to a boy. An heir. A grandson for my father” (216). Her father confirms this perspective with his own attachment to the children and his desire to give them his own family name. His comment that: “they’re Mannings, Manning boys. We ought to change their names” is insistently repeated (234).

When Rhoda returns to her husband after a temporary separation she explains her father’s anxiety: “I was going to go off and ruin his grandchildren. His hope of renewal, his survival, the survival of his genes. Manning boys, he was always saying when he showed them off. They’re perfect little Mannings” (272). What follows on from this awareness of lineage is the implication of the children as carrying forwards the perfection of whiteness. They are described in terms of golden light and angelic forms: “Malcolm’s the golden child and Jimmy is an apricot....They’re angels....” (263). The ways in which Rhoda describes her elder son communicates the importance of recognising radiant white superiority and understanding it in terms of male lineage: “Little Malcolm was like his father, made of ice and stone. A beautiful golden stony child” (287). This reference to both father and son as made of ice and stone ties
in to a further feature of the construction of white genealogy: images of ice, snow and cold.

Richard Dyer discusses this aspect of whiteness as relating to the mythical idea of the resilience and determination of white people in withstanding the coldness of a mountain environment. The idea of ice and snow is also associated with purity. Rhoda’s ancestors are described as “cold, laughing people”; her lover, and then husband, Malcolm, is often referred to as a cold, icy person and her son is described as “made of ice and stone” and yet also “beautiful” and “golden”. There seems to be some ambivalence for Rhoda in these terms. In her patriarchal ancestors, and in her husband, she finds the quality of coldness to be a distancing, even alienating one. Yet she also seems extremely proud that these qualities have been passed onto her son; that he will perpetuate the cold purity of whiteness.

This notion of reproducing specific qualities in each generation undermines the idea of white universal neutrality, for there now comes into play an assumption of distinct racial difference. Rhoda is in accord with the idea of memory existing down through the generations, outside of personal experience: “I think our minds have the memory of everything that ever happened to the human race” (256). Here Rhoda equates herself as one part of a universal ‘human’ race but her concept of whiteness and her later comments about specifically embodied heritage belie this perspective. The idea of whiteness as separate and superior, yet at the same time universal, is central to the construction of white racial identity: “In the quest for purity, whites win either way: either they are a distinct, pure race, superior to all others, or else they are the purest expression of the human race itself” (Dyer 22). Rhoda’s belief in the possibility of infinite knowledge and memory carries this assumption of universal humanity: “inside your head might be the whole history of everyone who ever was kin to you all the way back to the beginning of time when people began to think” (111). However, it becomes clear that those she counts as kin have very distinct racial associations.

Rhoda and her family locate themselves in relation to a strong ancestral connection. Rhoda describes the time that they returned South to live as “the golden summer, the summer we came home to the South to live among our people” (57). Rhoda’s people are defined in terms of their geographical origins and associated characteristics:
This is where my father’s people came when they left Scotland. They are cold
laughing people, with beautiful faces and unshakeable wills. They are powerful and
hot-tempered. They never forget a slight, never forgive a wrongdoing. They seldom
get sick. (20)

Physicality and temperament are interlinked in this description. The geographical connection
with the far north of Europe, with Scotland and Norway is repeated elsewhere in the text. The
home in Aberdeen, Alabama echoes the location of their Scottish origins and the
Celtic/Nordic references carry specific racial allusions. She imagines her heritage as a
connection stretching back through her kin and describes her own physicality as indicative of
the characteristics she has inherited from these ancestors: “There were furies I went into that
no one dared mess with. Lack of pigment, red hair, those old ancestors sacrificing their
strawmen, king for a day, oak knives. I was a throwback to that Celtic violence” (74). Rhoda
is able to make this claim and yet on other occasions to maintain a belief in a universalising
corporeal experience. There are implicit connections between whiteness, light and nationality
in relation not only to Northern Europe but to classical civilisations. Continuity from ancient
ancestors down through the generations is implied by the idea of the light that always shone
on them: “The sun beat down on me.... It poured down upon my hands and arms and sandaled
feet. The same sun had shone on ancient Greece, on Italy in the time of the Caesars, on me
when I was a small child in the Delta....” (297). Rhoda often refers to herself in terms of
Greek goddesses; Malcolm is described as a Greek God and they are both described as having
“divine young bodies”.

When Rhoda and Charles William go to visit a cockfight held by a group of
Klansmen it becomes apparent that Rhoda also functions within a hierarchy of whiteness.
This hierarchy of whiteness is emphasised with references to relative colour. The two go to
see the fight at night and the event is framed in images of darkness. Rhoda relates that they
wanted to “drift down into the real dark heart of the night and see what [they] could see” (32).
There are constant references to the night’s darkness when they arrive and the Klan’s aims are
also cited as “keeping the night as dark as it could be” (33). Rhoda feels intimidated by the
“dark faced white trash of the Delta”. In amongst these images is a discussion of Rhoda’s colouring. Charles William says: “I see you in mauve and violet and white. You’re so golden” and suggests designing a house for her in “white brick with many windows and gardens” (33). These allusions indicate that Rhoda’s colouring marks her as distinct from the whites in poorer circumstances than her own. This representation of poor whites illustrates Dyer’s observation that: “The instability of white as skin colour is not only a means of policing who at any given historical moment is going to be included in or out of the category, but also to differentiate within it, even among those whose racial identity is not in question” (57).

Rhoda unselfconsciously acknowledges this coding of whiteness within whiteness. She is scathing towards, and completely rejects the lower-class whites she perceives to be associated with the fight: “recruited from my dreams into the rank and file of White Trashdom, Inc. I looked into the cheap wavy mirror... and knew that I was lost” (39). Leaving the washroom in the store where the cock fight has been held Rhoda touches the door handle, “knowing past all biology” that she was touching something she could not erase. Rhoda pictures her hand as tainted and irrevocably stained by lower class squalor. That she knows this “past all biology” seems to suggest that her disgust overrides the biological connection she has with other whites.

With regard to her hierarchical perspective her attitude to the Klan is interesting. Rhoda’s claimed knowledge of the Klan is contradictory. She initially states about the Klan, protesting innocence, that:

I didn’t know what they did. I had not lived in the Deep South since I was a child. Everything I knew about the Klan I had read in Gone With the Wind. I thought their job was to keep black men from raping me. I didn’t even know about the hangings. (31-32)

Her attitude to the penultimate statement is unclear: is this a necessary or justifiable activity in her view? Yet shortly afterwards her knowledge of the Klan comes across as far more worldly and scathing. She knows that the Klan’s obsession was: “keeping the white race pure” and “keeping the Negroes in their place” (33). Her condescension is suggestive. She too is clearly
keen to maintain white purity but does not consciously acknowledge such a perspective. It is as though she has such faith in the upper class's ability to maintain their own kind that she sees such policing of the borders as unnecessary.

Rhoda’s allusions to the common elements of the universe of which all bodies are a part, are also undermined by Rhoda’s references to characteristics inherent in her maid’s body. Rhoda does associate blackness with a specific cultural embodiment; that is, with her racist notions of African culture. This attitude is expressed in her references to her maid Klane Marengo. Klane is first introduced with the announcement of “Klane Marengo’s brilliant black skin appearing at my door each morning” (281). Here she has been disembodied with only her skin as signifier. This is almost immediately followed up with a reference to her size, linked to African heritage: “She filled the door frame. She was six feet tall; she must have been of Watusi stock” (281). This idea of Klane’s heritage that Rhoda has constructed repeats itself as stereotype when Rhoda tells her husband: “I like her. She’s a Watusi. She’s supposed to be fierce” (306). In Rhoda’s perception a certain physicality indicates a certain racial/national identification which in turn has inherent characteristics.

Rhoda’s description of Watusi ‘nature’ becomes hyperbolic later when she hugs a distressed Klane and imagines that she is able to sense Klane’s feelings and her connection with Africa: “all of a sudden I was able to really hold her in my arms, all the long tall black body, all the history of her people, the majesty of the Watusi, spear and lion, ancient warrior race...” (308). Rhoda senses in Klane’s body “all the history of her people” connecting Klane’s body with a specific cultural memory. Yet this cultural memory is one that Rhoda has constructed based on supposition and assumption. She has attributed to Klane’s body limited and simplistic notions of Africa and ignored the process of cultural change and exchange that descendants of African slaves must have endured. This reductive attitude to black physicality is underlined by comments in the prologue about Charles William’s later illness and weak heart. Rhoda is indignant at the story of someone angry at receiving a heart transplanted from a black man. Rhoda wonders why they would mind such a thing; to have in them “Some huge sweet black heart beating out the rhythms of another continent” (358). In both this example
and the reference to “all the history” of Klane’s people Rhoda completely disregards the experience of the African diaspora and institutionalised slavery, a history which Rhoda is well aware of, as her comments about her family’s slaveholding past indicate. Yet Rhoda’s expression of connection with Klane creates a link between African Americans in the present and Africans in the past, with no interventions. However, the other perception of Klane’s physicality that Rhoda adopts functions in relation to black women’s roles during slavery, especially the conception of a black woman as a carer and substitute mother for the whole family. Rhoda communicates her feeling of being able to rely on Klane to carry her family’s burden with the image of Klane’s large frame. When Rhoda’s young son Jimmy is ill in hospital Klane is portrayed as big and strong enough to hold Jimmy safe in her arms and calm him, and as having the endurance to stay up all night with him while Rhoda sleeps. Klane is apparently willing and able to offer unbounded love and protection to mother and child, putting her own family life on hold in order to do so. While Klane’s children have been sent away for the summer to pick cotton, Klane says of Rhoda’s son Jimmy “He’s my baby... I takes care of him” and to the boy “I got you right here at my heart”. Klane is also described as the only person who can control Rhoda’s other son Malcolm. Her body is situated as protection and support, understood in terms of the services it can offer. Klane’s body performs the work Rhoda does not want to do and takes “my boring work off my hands” but is presented as loving voluntary service of one body for another: “She’s wonderful with my children, she loves them. She loves me” (301).

Portraying Klane’s work as something she does for love disguises the reality of one person in the service of another. When Klane herself is in serious trouble with the police Rhoda’s response is inconsistent and naive. The power imbalance is indicated by the descriptions of light shining on Klane when she is in Rhoda’s presence, but after a spell in jail she returns “darkened” by her experiences. When Klane is in the presence of light it is not that light emanates from her but that it falls upon her. This occurs at the hospital when Rhoda feels intense relief that her son is cared for by the white doctors and black maids: “A flat clear light was all across the black marble floor. [Klane] walked across it in her majesty and handed
Jimmy to me” (295). After Klane is accused of stabbing another woman, in a fit of jealousy, Rhoda goes to visit her in jail, where she finds that Klane “smelled like the night, dark and forlorn” (308). When Klane is let out on bail, and returns to Rhoda’s house, this image of darkness is repeated: “On Tuesday morning Klane was back in my kitchen. Subdued, darkened, but back” (310). Klane does not seem to exist in the world of radiant light when she has been out of Rhoda’s presence. Later, sitting drinking coffee, Klane is included once again in Rhoda’s universe: “Light was pouring in the windows. Pouring down upon the kitchen table... and the vase of lilies I had cut that morning. Klane sipped her coffee, then set the cup down.... Her hands lay in a streak of sunlight” (311). In Rhoda’s presence Klane’s body is skirted by light. While Rhoda’s body is made “of light, of starcarbon and molecules”, Klane is only able to stand at the periphery of the lighted world. This situating of bodies and light demonstrates further that Rhoda’s body exists for her in a hierarchy in which white bodies transcend limiting flesh and blood, while non-white bodies exist on an inferior material plane.

In this context it is not surprising that the novel communicates contradictory messages about racial mixing. Rhoda’s father, the white patriarch still pining for the days of slavery, predictably expresses extreme intolerance for any possibility of racial interaction. Rallying against civil rights he declares: “Now the niggers will be all over us.... They’ll take us over. They’ll mongrelize the races” (233). In the civil rights debate Rhoda is unsure where she stands and confesses to being easily swayed. Alarmingly, she sides with her father when she is with him, giving the lie to her rejection of white patriarchal mores and her claims of bonding with her servants. Her father’s prejudices are shown to be myopic and hypocritical, in the worst traditions of the slaveholding South, by his relationship with his servant Mayberry. Mayberry seems to hold a place of special respect because she sleeps as little and wakes as early as Mr Manning, and is as cynical about the world as he is. He reads the papers to her while she cooks, and describes their relationship as “what and what”. Rhoda comments however that Mayberry “was probably as much Scots as my father”, thus acknowledging that race mixing existed long before civil rights and that it was part and parcel of white slave owners’ exploitation of the slaves. (336) Mr Manning’s furious views on the “mongrelisation
of the races” are clearly selective. Rhoda says of Mayberry: “She was so light skinned she thought she was above the other black people” (336). Is this sense of hierarchy also the reason that Mayberry holds such special respect in the Manning household?

Again, Rhoda’s recognition of race mixing undermines white transcendence of physicality construed by images of celestial radiance. Race interaction further assumes the coming together of two distinct and separate ‘races’. What is also interesting in the description of Mayberry then is the reference to her “pale golden face”. Ambiguity now surrounds the references to Rhoda’s children as “golden”. If the term golden refers not to light but to a specific colour, the purity of whiteness is challenged and the distinction between black and white is blurred. The acknowledgement of any colour at all brings the superior neutrality of white bodies into question. In terms of Rhoda’s own body and that of her children the word golden describes light, but in relation to Mayberry it describes a colour. At the same time the word golden constructs Mayberry’s body as the same as those of her employers. This linguistic slip raises questions about the parameters of whiteness. Where is the boundary between white and black if both the wealthy white elite and the servants they employ embody a quality of golden colouring and light? The allusion to Mayberry as golden exposes the arbitrary nature of boundaries of whiteness.

The novel’s conclusion insists on a reassertion of the hierarchy. Ultimately white authority fails Klane and it is her body which is destroyed when she hangs herself. Rhoda is whisked back yet again to the security of her father’s home. Flying back to Alabama with him on the plane Rhoda concludes her account of her youthful years with the words: “He took dominion everywhere. I closed my eyes and went back to sleep” (356). The idea of dominion recalls the authority and ownership which characterised the slaveholders’ attitudes. Rhoda’s sleeping body accedes to this domination.

Rhoda states at the beginning of the novel, looking back over her life, that it will be an account of how she broke free from the bonds her father tied her with. This clearly becomes a self-deceptive description of the novel for at its conclusion she is equally dependent on him as at the start. Getting free from her father has wider symbolic implications
in relation to all that her father represents. Rhoda links the novel’s thematic concern about getting free with a broader social theme: “That’s what this country is about, isn’t it? Getting free. Freeing people from their pasts” (2). Yet Rhoda’s attitudes remain clearly entangled with her society’s past. Her understanding of her bodily existence in the world is fundamentally linked to ideas about gender, race and class fixed in place by white patriarchal power struggles. Rhoda’s accounts of interactions with Klane and with working class whites completely destroy the credibility of her understanding of universal humanity. Her false assumptions are indicated in her description of the process of growing cotton: “Cotton comes up from nothing, from sun and rain and red earth, and we turn it into gold, into houses and cars and money” (347). The use of the pronoun ‘we’ indicates a false inclusion of the white elite in the actual process of labouring over the cotton. Her comment indicates no real conception of the bodily practices and effects of growing cotton for black people or the white working classes. Her understanding of the white cotton coming “from nothing”, magically from the sun and earth, transformed into gold and power, echoes her belief that whiteness comes from nothing, a pure extension of the universe and with effortless access to wealth and power. Yet her assumptions about whiteness as universal actually signify a very specific racial construction of whiteness which is integral to her own corporeality.
Chapter Three

Voices, Body Language and Telling Silences: Forms of Expression
in Ellen Douglas’s Can’t Quit You Baby

In Ellen Douglas’s novel Can’t Quit You Baby three voices advance through the text: the voice of a black woman, Tweet, who speaks for herself; of a white woman, Cornelia, who rarely speaks, and of an omnipresent and highly self-conscious narrator who persistently interrogates the complex relations between the two women. In this chapter then the focus will not be primarily constructions of blackness or of whiteness but the negotiations that are unavoidable between women who define themselves as existing on either side of that division. Initially, Tweet tells her own stories of her past, presenting them as part gift, part challenge to Cornelia, her white employer, who listens selectively. Cornelia (who calls Tweet by her birth name, Julia) does not offer her own story in return; instead it is revealed for her by the narrator. The interaction of the characters’ voices and silences, under the narrator’s scrutiny, reveal the difficulties of communication between the white woman and her black maid. The development of Cornelia’s anger and grief about her life moves her towards awareness and the desire to make real contact, while Tweet’s mounting frustration with Cornelia’s refusal to realistically acknowledge her life becomes anger that first silences her and then bursts forth in a confrontation that allows both women to finally speak their truths. The evolution of the women’s relationship is disclosed by a narrator who is acutely aware of the degree to which she negotiates how and when the reader hears the women’s voices.

Douglas conveys the struggle of each woman to speak about, conceal, listen to, or not hear their own story and that of the other. Yet there is more than one way of speaking present in the text, for the language of the women’s bodies gives weight to their voices and their silences. The depictions of the women’s bodies correspond with their psychological states: to their attempts to speak, listen or remain silent. The women use their bodies, often without being conscious that they are doing so, to communicate what they cannot or will not express.
verbally. Cornelia’s deafness, then, is clearly a metaphor for her intellectual inability to really hear what others are saying and her refusal to acknowledge the existence or validity of experiences other than those she has constructed for herself. The novel presents Cornelia negotiating her physical disability in ways that enable her to block out the world and yet not recognise her own collusion in ignoring others’ voices. Whereas Cornelia avoids communication as often as possible, and only begins to open up as the result of a major emotional shock, Tweet’s aim is to articulate as much as she can, as openly as possible. She uses her voice to speak and sing all her stories, feelings and attitudes. Her body shuts down in response to the seeming ineffectualness of her utterance. The blockage in Tweet’s brain, the aneurysm, which prevents her speaking, is a physical expression of her emotional fury that her speech is not acknowledged. Douglas combines ideas about difficulties of speech and hearing, as well as attitudes to physical beauty and body movement, with well orchestrated metaphors of sound, to increase awareness of the realities of the two women’s abilities to communicate.

However, there is another, more problematic, aspect to the construction of the women’s physicalities. While the narrator does articulate her anxieties about conveying complexities in her subjects’ lives and acknowledging the biases in her account, her presentation of the women’s appearances perpetuates stereotypical associations which remain undiscussed. The final part of this chapter will explore this issue and discuss how the role of a more minor character, Willie Belle, mediates this situation.

A helpful perspective in contextualising the connections between embodiment and voice is provided by Judith Bradford and Crispin Sartwell, who explore the association between the right, or ability, to speak and specific embodiment. The perspective they highlight assists in understanding the extent to which Tweet and Cornelia feel able to speak, and how each hears what the other says. Bradford and Sartwell are especially concerned with racial constructions of embodied voices: “We attach voices to bodies; we deploy expectations about the ways a female, dark-skinned body can speak or about the ways a male, light-skinned body can speak, for example. And that deployment conditions the way we can receive
voices that proceed from those bodies” (192). Both Cornelia and Tweet are obviously influenced by assumptions about the timing and place of appropriate speech in relation to their racial embodiment, and at different times conform to, or reject, these assumptions. The forces at play here are eloquently expressed by Bradford and Sartwell:

there are categories of appropriate voices that are heard as emerging from the bodies regimented by our systematics of body categorization. This normative attachment of certain voices to certain bodies can be used in many ways. It is a space in which one can try to erase one's embodiment, or to declare it, or to work against it and hence against the socially organised taxonomies of bodies. (192)

This acknowledgement of an individual’s awareness of voice consignment is pertinent to Tweet’s decisions to speak her mind, Cornelia’s attempts not to receive unsettling speech and the shifts both of them must make around the tensions this creates. What adds another, and important, facet to Tweet’s and Cornelia’s vocal expressions is the extent to which their body language echoes their voices in significant ways. The illness, pain, physical breakdown and healing they experience communicate, at a deeper level, their responses to the personal mediation their situation calls for.

Each woman’s awareness of the other’s embodiment is clearly related to her assumptions about racial identity informed by her Southern location. Their difficulties are founded in the attitudes, assumptions and prejudices that arise from their functioning within a, still residual, slave/mistress paradigm. The two previous chapters have focused on an individual woman’s understanding of her own body, whether or not she understands it as constructed relatively to other bodies. Douglas’s novel brings the focus around to the interaction between two women, and the ways that their cross-racial responses are communicated bodily and affect their corporeal understandings. Other critics have traced the complex organisation of voices in the text in terms of the expression of a racial power dynamic and persistent attitudes which hark back to slavery. This chapter demonstrates that a deeper understanding of this aspect of the novel can be gained by exploring each woman’s physical responses as aspects of her ways of communicating. Tweet and Cornelia’s vocal
expressions and silences are echoed by their body language and by physical expressions of
disability, illness and pain. A deeper understanding of the two women's cross-racial
relationship, and its underlying tensions, will be gained from fully exploring all their forms of
utterance.

Laura Doyle's perspective is helpful here. In her study Bordering on the Body she
argues that a phenomenological approach to the depictions of bodies in modern fiction offers
important insights into the ways the constructions of bodies function in certain texts. In Toni
Morrison's Beloved, for example, Doyle traces the points at which bodies' phenomenological
interactions with their world enable a recovery of past and self:

Morrison reinforces the point here that for each of us the embodied Other
rematerializes our past, even as the plash of water might, and she further hints, as the
drama of Beloved, Paul D, Sethe, and Denver unfolds, that the embodied world and
the embodied Other insert past into present interactively, bringing their own
pasts to bear upon our bearing upon them. (219)

This analysis has much to offer a reading of Douglas's novel, in which interactions with an
embodied racial Other alert the individual to the way assumptions rooted in a racial power
imbalance have informed their own physicality. The process of acknowledgement, in which
bodily sentience plays an integral role, recalls embedded knowledge and its effects.

Douglas has explored the subject matter of racial interaction, and of the difficulties of
communication, in earlier works. She has been concerned with ways of telling the truth: how
it is revealed or hidden by different narrative perspectives. Her work often considers, as in her
novels Where the Dreams Cross (1968) and The Rock Cried Out (1979), different individuals'
truths regarding the South's racial legacy, and how they are concealed by guilt and anger. Her
collection of stories in Black Cloud, White Cloud (1963) examines the dynamics of cross
racial relationships. The stories 'I Just Love Carrie Lee' and 'Hold On', especially, are
concerned with white women's negotiations of their relationships with black servants, their
attempts at speech and the meaning-laden silences that surround those interactions. Can’t Quit You Baby is her most sophisticated exploration of these themes and the first in which constructions of bodies are examined as factors in the interracial dynamic.

Minrose Gwin has extensively traced characterisations of interracial friendships as expressive of issues surrounding race relations set in place during slavery. She explores the “volatile, often violent connection between black and white women of the Old South” in American fiction and autobiography (4). She argues that this particular set of interactions is representative of ambiguities at the heart of slavery:

in its paradox and conflict, in its connective tissues of race, gender, and power, the relationship between black and white women in the nineteenth-century South may be seen as paradigmatic of the central ambiguity of southern racial experience: its antipathy, bitterness, and guilt on the one hand, its very real bonding through common suffering on the other. (4)

Gwin examines texts which she finds to be “literary signifiers of that experience”. Can’t Quit You, Baby offers a further account of such connection as the paradoxical forces Gwin highlights continue to manifest themselves in Tweet and Cornelia’s relationship in the latter years of the twentieth century.

In her essay dealing with the novel in terms of confronting and interrogating interracial friendship, Sharon Monteith identifies the two women’s relationship as “historically ‘knowable’ and exacting, set as it is against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement” (19). Both Charles Fister and Jan Shoemaker identify significant undercurrents that reach further back in Southern history. They offer analyses of negotiations of the racial and gender legacy of slavery, particularly in relation to the constructions of the narrator’s and characters’ voices. Fister’s premise is that: “speech and the larger matter of voice are bound up with freedom”, and he explores how the novel negotiates the former in order to move towards the latter (99). A specific freedom that Fister perceives as of central importance is the

1 For helpful discussions of these stories see Shoemaker (1995), Donaldson (1995) and Manning (1984).
need to escape limiting racial assumptions resulting from "guilt and antipathy" surrounding historical constructs of slave and mistress. He explores how these are dealt with in the novel in relation to who speaks and who is silent. His concern is with the interactive, open-ended, call and response aspects of the narrative which engage the two central characters, the narrator and the reader. He argues that silences in the text function to draw attention to the ambiguities of the women's relationship, as much as their dialogue.

Jan Shoemaker also explores the subjects of voice and silence, and their centrality to negotiating cross racial relationships, in Douglas's *Can't Quit You Baby* and 'Hold On'. She indicates that the slave/mistress paradigm is important in contextualising the narrative and pinpoints the moments when anxiety about this is expressed. There is discomfort on the narrator's part, and on the two characters' parts, with the implications of the terms "servant and mistress" so "housekeeper and employer" is settled for. Shoemaker comments on the perspective that is revealed by this: "'Servant,' after all, suggests 'slave,' and Cornelia is an enlightened, genteel Mississippi lady of the nineteen-sixties and seventies. Slavery is a thing of the past, but not so far in the past for her to forget that the Bible says that the last shall be first" (87). She also connects Cornelia's discomfort with naming with the continuing influence that slave-holding ideology retains over her attitudes. Cornelia does not feel comfortable calling Tweet, and her husband, Nig, by the names they have chosen for themselves and so she calls them Julia and Mr Carrier. As the narrator points out, Julia, like Cornelia, is a Roman name. Cornelia overlays the two people's usual names with those she feels are more respectable, which clearly also enables her to maintain a sense of distance. Shoemaker draws an interesting equation between the choosing of names and terms, and overtones of slaveholder's authority:

These choices aren't accidental; they set the tone and establish the cultural codes within which discourse is allowed or disallowed, who speaks, who says what, when and where. Even who listens. These are the remnants of the even greater silencing of slaves, who were not usually allowed to name themselves or their children. (87)
Shoemaker, like Fister, primarily concentrates on issues of naming and of silencing. Shoemaker states that “choosing to tell or to be silent and, conversely, choosing to listen or not to listen become the overriding choices” in a novel where “voice and silence become metaphors for choices about race” (88, 87).

Both Shoemaker and Fister allude to Cornelia’s deafness and Tweet’s aneurysm as important metaphorical devices. Fister refers to Cornelia’s deafness and Tweet’s aneurysm as characterising “a rupture between inner and outer speech” that the narrative explores and questions (102). Shoemaker asserts that “The antithesis of silence/speaking and deafness/hearing augment the pattern of antitheses that permeate the book” (89). Yet neither writer extends this crucial aspect of the novel. The construction of Cornelia’s and Tweet’s physicality as expressive of race and gender mediations is interwoven throughout the text. Tracing the characters’ body language in all its forms, and its reinforcement of, or challenge to, what is said or left unspoken, reveals much about what motivates the women, their assumptions and the racial interactions they pursue. This perspective reveals the positive work the novel does in terms of consistently questioning and re-evaluating the dynamics of cross racial interactions. It also constructively draws attention to persistent assumptions about race, embodiment, beauty and access to power.

The factors that underlie Tweet and Cornelia’s interaction are approached in the novel’s opening pages. Even while it is recognised that “There is no getting around in these stories of two lives that the black woman is the white woman’s servant” the reader is asked to be absentminded “about race and class, place and time, even about poverty and wealth, security and deprivation” (4-5). Clearly such issues are highlighted by this request. It is only towards the novel’s conclusion that they are finally spelt out:

the truth is that there is no way Tweet could present herself so that you would be absentminded. No way. She is black. Cornelia is white. She is servant. Cornelia is mistress. She is poor. The measure of her poverty is that she considers Cornelia (who thinks of herself as modestly well-off) immensely wealthy. (240)

The reason it is important to Tweet to speak out honestly, to make white employers listen, and
why Cornelia tries to block out what Tweet says, is the wide race and class gap that divides them. Their gender is their common ground but the way race intersects with this alters that commonality. One small factor in their lives says much about this situation. It is stated early on that the only place the two women can sit down together is across the kitchen table. This is a reference to social disapproval of blacks and whites meeting socially. Yet it is also significant that it is such a domestic space in which these two people come together. As women, the kitchen, where they prepare food for husbands and families, is their common ground. However, another small incident speaks volumes about the division between them and how this manifests itself in body language. The situation arises the day after Martin Luther King’s assassination when Cornelia, exhibiting extreme naïveté, goes to comfort Tweet. As Cornelia stands in the doorway of Tweet’s house, the awkwardness is apparent: 

“Tweet cannot nod. She turns away and shakes her head…. I’m sorry, Cornelia says again. But she dares not reach out, dares not cross the two paces that separate them” (99). The gap in understanding between the women which results from their different race and class experience is made literal by the actual gap created between their bodies, from which Tweet turns away and which Cornelia cannot attempt to bridge.

Yet Tweet has attempted to reach Cornelia with words. She is the one person who has always spoken her story purposefully loud enough for Cornelia to hear it. Her voice rings loud and clear through most of the novel. She notices Cornelia’s attempts to avoid listening and does not let them pass unnoticed. This situation is queried by the narrator: “Why is it that Tweet is the only one who raises her voice and tells Cornelia what is really going on?” (129). It is suggested that it is “a quality in her love” that keeps Cornelia’s family from telling her what their lives are really like. To her family Cornelia’s love is dependent upon them fulfilling her expectations and not confirming her fear that they will fail. Tweet is not restricted by this controlling love. Instead, it is the animosity which Tweet feels towards Cornelia which gives her the freedom to speak up. It seems that she keeps speaking not so much despite, but more often because the stories are discomforting to her sheltered, white mistress. This has been a pattern in Tweet’s life: to confront her white employers with the
realities of her situation and make them answerable for their part in her difficulties. With regard to what Tweet discusses with Cornelia, the narrator wonders: “How could she be sure a white woman would listen tolerantly?” (97). The explanation provided applies not just in relation to Cornelia, but to all her white employers: “The answer, I think, is that she did not care. She had her requirements of herself and of an employer: She would speak about certain matters. If she got fired, she got fired” (97). It is more important to Tweet to receive intolerance, having spoken honestly, than to be tolerated under a false premise. What she does care about is when she is tolerated because a person cannot even hear the reality of her truths.

Such is the case with Cornelia. It becomes clear, as the novel progresses, that Cornelia could hear a great deal more than she does. Much of her inability to hear is aggravated by her attempts to block out the world around her. While Tweet tells her stories, the way in which Cornelia responds is directly linked with her attitude towards her physical disability and the way she uses her hearing aid. The first story introduced to the reader is Tweet’s account of her sexual harassment by a previous white employer, Wayne Jones. Cornelia is clearly uncomfortable with this story and at the same time seems to be having trouble with her hearing aid: “bad connection” she says. Within Tweet’s story there is an indication of the possible extent of the link between the physiological and the psychological. When Tweet learns that Wayne Jones died of cancer she asks: “You think you can make yourself die of cancer?” (8) Later Cornelia will come to entertain this theory herself, but for now she rejects it. She continues to consider herself ‘a listener’ and will not recognise that she has made herself deaf to ideas she cannot accept. When Cornelia does listen it is with condescension, doubt and rejection. It becomes clear that she is not actually a listener but an actor with “a rich stock of responses which serve a general purpose” of making people believe she is listening when actually she cannot hear a word they have said (14). The reader is told that neither Tweet nor Cornelia is ‘absentminded’ about differences of race and class between them. However, when Tweet recounts tales of her childhood, particularly her belief in the supernatural, we learn that “Expressionless, absentminded, Cornelia listened and did not listen” (36).
There are times when Cornelia just cannot hear, when she comes across unexpected "mounds of silence". There are also times when she manipulates how much she can hear and how much is silence. The narrator’s attempt to portray Cornelia, to ask the reader how they see her, is revealing: “Do you notice that she stands slightly swayback, as if she’s lifted her shoulders like a queen...? Do you see the tensing of her neck muscles, as she resists the impulse to turn her head slightly, refuses to favor her good ear?” (39). The overriding impression here is of her pride, which prevents her opening up to others. It is apparent that she could help herself hear better if she chose to but that she closes herself to that option. Here the emphasis is on not allowing herself to hear better. At other times she deliberately makes her hearing worse. Faced with Tweet’s account of witnessing her stepmother dancing naked for her father, Cornelia “surreptitiously” turns down the volume on her hearing aid. The instrument that “had been perfected as if at her command” to help her hear, actually enables her greater control over not hearing (11). It allows her to coincide her desire to dismiss uncomfortable information with a seemingly genuine justification for not hearing.

So it appears that Cornelia is choosing to prevent her body from responding to the racial pulse that affects her life. She will not hear Tweet’s stories of growing up black or even her own internal stories of growing up white. In contrast to Tweet’s ability to tell of her life, Cornelia is extremely uncomfortable with speaking out about herself: “To her it is almost unthinkable to speak to anyone, even herself, of her feelings, her childhood, her intimate life with her husband, even her children’s lives. Such confidences are not simply trashy, dishonorable... for her they are scarcely formulable” (66). Cornelia is completely silenced by her internalisation of social conventions of appropriate behaviour for a white woman. Even while her whiteness gives her power, her defined female role undermines her independence and agency. Her difficulty with speaking is directly connected to her damaged hearing. The narrator tells us that : “Unlike many deaf people, she has not solved the problem of her own occasional boredom and confusion and isolation by becoming a nonstop talker” (14). Quite the opposite in fact, for she takes pride in her own silences: both the silence she presents and the silence she receives.
So Cornelia and Tweet possess different attitudes to speaking. Similar differences are apparent in each woman’s ability to see. Whereas Cornelia can never really see herself objectively, Tweet is much more able to behold the reality of her situation. Cornelia has a physical characteristic, deafness, which emphasises her psychological rejection of reality. Conversely, Tweet has an unusual physical feature which seems symbolic of her ability to really see a situation. Even as a child Tweet’s eyes showed “shrewdness and resolution” and she describes herself as “foresighted” (40,17). She has unusual, completely blue, eyes: “The irises are two-colored - concentric circles, the inner blue-black, the outer a pale blue - and the white is not white, but faintly tinged with a blue as pure as the sky” (7). Tweet says of her eyes that they “make people look twice” and it seems fitting therefore that the two-coloured concentric circles make her appear “as if she might be looking at you twice” and so giving commensurate return to another’s gaze (7). Tweet’s eyes seem to suggest that she has unusual depth and breadth vision. The narrator tells us that: “every act in a human life has layer upon enfolded layer, not only of imagining, but of circumstance beneath it” (41). Tweet’s eyes suggest that she has the ability to see more than the surface layer. Although some people find her eyes unnerving, Cornelia “thinks them beautiful” (7). This could be her genuine opinion, or maybe a conscious or subconscious act of condescending generosity. However, others of Cornelia’s views would seem to indicate a refusal to look properly at what is disturbing. She has a propensity to palliate challenging issues so that she can assimilate them more easily. Cornelia is full of platitudes which draw simplistic lines around complex moral dilemmas. She says to Tweet, on different occasions, that: “It’s a waste of time and energy to hate people” and that “right is right and wrong is wrong” (8,20). When Tweet tells Cornelia of her desire to kill her exploitative landlord, Cornelia is surely trying to calm herself when she says: “Julia, you don’t mean that. Not really” (103). So Cornelia’s view that Tweet’s eyes are beautiful highlights her own lack of desire to recognise what could be unsettling. This blinkered sight is a stark contrast to Tweet’s visual scope. When Cornelia finally does see Tweet’s eyes properly: “she saw a look of such rage and hatred there, it ran through the air like fire through a wick, joined their eyes together” (238). Cornelia is able to say to Tweet: “I
saw how you looked at me. I saw it” (238). The two women are divided when Cornelia tries to make a situation unrealistically pleasant, but are connected with a recognition of antagonism.

Tweet’s antagonism has always bubbled beneath the surface of her positive intentions. The narrator describes Tweet’s stories as gifts, but this choice of word only serves to highlight the potentially hostile nature of Tweet’s offerings. Tweet relates the story of how she lost the land bequeathed to her by her grandfather, as the result of the deceit and greed of white lawyers. The beginning of Tweet’s account emphasises her desire to make Cornelia look at a situation: “at last she can’t resist talking about it, can’t resist giving the gift of Percy Quinn to Cornelia, can’t resist watching Cornelia visualise that pleasant office... where all the decisions... are made” (114). But Cornelia fights the possibility of looking and listening.

Tweet is aware that Cornelia shares the same blinkered outlook as other white women she has encountered. She makes the connection between Cornelia and Mrs Lord, her mistress when she was a sharecropper, both of whom use the endless small and intricate domestic details of their lives to distract their attention from a wider world of human experience which they perceive as fearful. After relating to Cornelia her attempts to extract her rightful pay from the Lords, Tweet waits for Cornelia to respond, but no reply is forthcoming: “She paused here, as if expecting a comment from Cornelia, but Cornelia said nothing. Like Mrs. Lord she was absorbed in the task at hand - stirring, rolling, turning, cutting out” (106).

In her narrative of her childhood Tweet includes her feelings about white people even though those feelings are highly confrontational to the white woman who is listening. The following exchange, begun by Tweet and interrupted by Cornelia, illustrates the type of issues Tweet raises:

Evil out there. I be a fool not to know that. She continued: Most girl-
children need to be afraid - afraid of white men, white women, white kids...

Would you be afraid of me, if...?

But Tweet went on.... (17)

Tweet is aware of the implications that her stories about white exploitation have for Cornelia
as a white woman. The narrator ponders the reasons why Tweet may feel anxiety about telling Cornelia how she lost her grandfather’s land:

She must be angry with herself - ashamed - because she didn’t succeed in keeping the land... And besides, she may think it would be too hard on Cornelia for her to tell this story. The implications might damage their friendship. Cornelia, after all, didn’t steal her land. She may not even believe that, given the opportunity, Cornelia would steal from her, although, hmmm... (97-8)

This passage shows both the importance to Tweet of maintaining her dignity regarding the loss of the land and the way that Cornelia is associated by virtue of race and class with those who did steal Tweet’s land. Yet Cornelia uses numerous devices of avoidance so that she does not have to hear Tweet’s stories or face their implications.

Tweet becomes increasingly angry, frustrated and resentful that she is not being heard. This anger manifests itself as illness and Tweet eventually becomes so ill that she is prevented from speaking by an aneurysm: a physical block in the brain. Her body communicates what she has avoided in words: her fury at her mistress’s arrogance and the arrogance of other white employers which Cornelia’s attitude recalls. It is ironic that it is during the time when Cornelia is beginning to actually listen to Tweet that Tweet’s anger and frustration with Cornelia reaches its peak. Cornelia takes action to deal with the grief and guilt associated with her husband’s death. She has begun to come to terms with the reality of her family’s lives and is travelling to New York to spend time by herself. Tweet’s voice goes with her: “Now, sitting in her place, fastening her seat belt, she hears Tweet’s voice. Well, I reckon I’ll go, too, Tweet says” (180). Cornelia, in her arrogance, seems to believe this to be some form of telepathy. But as Tweet angrily points out later this was not the case: “Talking all that shit about me being with you in New York. You ain’t never seen me, heard me in your entire life and you talking that shit. I wasn’t in no New York” (254-5). This outburst is made after Tweet has regained the use of her voice but it indicates the kind of anger that existed before she lost it. Tweet wasn’t actually with Cornelia in New York but words she had previously spoken did begin to reach Cornelia’s consciousness. Meanwhile, Tweet, back in the South.
has suffered physical damage which has silenced her. Tweet’s illness can be read as a metaphor not just for how much the ignorance of others has damaged her, but also how much the block caused by her own unspoken anger has caused her pain. Tweet spoke to Cornelia about how she felt regarding other events and people in her life but never directly with regard to how she felt about Cornelia herself. She tried to indicate how she felt about her employer by describing her highly antagonistic attitude to previous white employers. But the pressure which prevented her really speaking her truth became a physical block in her brain that prevented her speaking at all.

There are small warnings of Tweet’s impending physical crisis. Cornelia notices that she has started standing still and staring, in a way that is more absorbed than daydreaming. After Cornelia’s husband, John, has died and Cornelia is staying with her son, Tweet has the opportunity for some time away from work. But instead of lightening the stress, it is during this time away from Cornelia that the trouble worsens and Tweet has recurring dizzy spells. By the time Cornelia has, literally, come to her senses in New York Tweet’s senses have failed her and she has suffered severe physical damage. A swelling artery in her brain had created a blockage and a leakage which caused her body to shut down and fall forward onto a hot stove. The accident left her burnt, scarred, partially paralysed and unable to speak. The news of the accident is imparted to Cornelia over the phone by Tweet’s stepdaughter. She explains about the burning but also says that “it wasn’t just the burn. Something else was obviously wrong” (221). This is a reference to the aneurysm but also hints at the need for an explanation at a deeper level. The ‘something else’ that was wrong would seem to be the years of mounting rage that have accumulated to the point where the anger is internally damaging. When Cornelia goes to see Tweet in person, her mother Rosa’s summary of the situation is a bleak, terse list of what Tweet has lost: she “Don’t say a word. Can’t talk. Mind’s gone” (231). The emphasis is on Tweet’s inability to talk. It is stated repeatedly by her mother and daughter that “she don’t say nothing” and “don’t know nothing”. This is a startling reversal of her previous role as the one who took responsibility for speaking, and underscores the extent to which she has been silenced and has silenced herself.
Yet beneath the silence there is an undercurrent of sound, literally a hum; a background noise that moves to the foreground. Rosa repeats, on several occasions, the information that Tweet “hums to herself some”. The sound seems fairly intense because Rosa says that Tweet hums until “it drive you out of your mind”. While Cornelia talks to Tweet’s mother and daughter, the sound of the radio, which Tweet refuses to have turned off, pushes through. Gradually both the music and Tweet’s intonations become increasingly noticeable. From the very beginning Tweet has sung and although the experts claim that blood is slowly leaking from her misshapen arteries, her body can still give forth a kind of music.

Song is a way of communicating which goes back to her childhood with her grandfather. In a tale she told Cornelia she recalled: “He was partial to the cane fife and the drum. Sang them old blues. Like this: That’s all right, baby. You gon need my help some day” (16). What Tweet has really felt has been indicated by the songs she sings. When Cornelia will not acknowledge how much Tweet hated Wayne Jones, the man who tried to rape her, Tweet begins singing softly to herself: “twelve o’clock they killed him. Glad to see him die...” (8). The extent of her contempt for her father is established with just a snatch of song: “Meanest man I ever seen, she sang. Ask him for water, and he give me gasoline...” (21). Certain songs seem to hold particular significance and repeat throughout the novel. One such song is playing when Cornelia goes to visit Tweet after the accident: “Everytime I feel the spirit/ Moving in my heart, I sing” (232). The heart is symbolically important here for it represents both existence at a basic physical level and is emblematic of human emotions: it is both of the body and signifies feelings on a higher plane. Tweet’s humming surges forth, struggling to communicate what she feels in her heart, until the children realise the sound has form and can be identified as words. Once she is listened to she can speak her anger.

In the same way that Tweet’s humming forms an undercurrent to the conversation her employer has with her relatives, music forms an undercurrent to the speech that runs throughout the novel. The musical metaphor at the beginning of the novel contributes another aspect to the body language of race and class. In the first few pages of the novel the narrator draws the reader’s attention to the complexity of issues that surround the relationship between
Cornelia and Tweet by asking the reader to be absentminded about them: to try and ignore or forget “about race and class, place and time, even about poverty and wealth” (5). The psychological impact of this request is to make reflection on these race and class issues irresistible. Apparently, the women themselves are not absentminded about these “dreadful matters”. For them: “race sounded the endlessly repeated ground bass above and entwined with which they danced the passacaglia (or, as it may sometimes appear, the boogie) of their lives” (5). This is the first time the motif of music and danced is introduced: a motif that is frequently repeated and elaborated upon throughout the novel. Music and dance are subjects which extend the central idea of body language as they are connected with hearing and movement. The metaphor here, of race as a rhythm to which the women dance, is telling because for Cornelia dancing is something she can no longer do: it is entirely associated with sadness and loss. Cornelia is deaf, so: “although she feels the beat, wants to dance, the music is all but lost on her, skewed by the powerful amplification of her hearing aid” (11). So Cornelia cannot initially dance the passacaglia, the boogie of her life, or of racial awareness, for the same reason that she cannot always properly hear Tweet telling her stories of a black woman’s experiences.

When Cornelia does finally want to communicate with Tweet, to listen properly to her and speak openly about her own troubles, she reaches far across the divide that previously separated them and comes into contact with Tweet’s body. During her first attempt to talk to Tweet, she combines verbal and physical interaction:

Tweet? Hello. She moves closer, takes the shaking hand in both of hers, squeezes it, separates the fingers, gently massages the palm. I’m home, she says. I’ve come to see you. Hello. Tweet? Hello. (234)

Later she begins to stroke Tweet’s neck. This does not elicit an attempt to speak but Tweet does give a physical response: “[Cornelia] stops a moment, keeps her hands resting on Tweet’s shoulders, feels under her hand a slight tremor” (237). It feels to Cornelia as though Tweet has shrugged, although the meaning of this shrug is ambivalent: does it indicate acknowledgement, indifference or an attempt to shrug Cornelia off? The massage Cornelia
gives Tweet seems intimate; she “lays aside the shawl, moves her hands along Tweet’s upper arms, gently squeezes and manipulates the muscles” (237). Cornelia seeks a close bond with Tweet now, but despite the physical contact, “skin touching skin”, Cornelia does not fully appreciate the anger that keeps them separate.

When she first arrives to visit she is greeted at the door by Tweet’s mother Rosa. In a scene that recalls an earlier meeting with Tweet, Cornelia feels conscious of and unwilling to cross the breach between them: “Hello, Rosa. Cornelia does not offer to touch cheeks with that dark forbidding face” (231). With this in mind, Cornelia’s behaviour towards Tweet seems partly an imposition made possible by Tweet’s weakness and lack of voice. Although Cornelia has reached a point where she can recognise and even acknowledge the look of “rage and hatred” which Tweet gives her, she is not ready to discuss the causes or implications of the look: “I can’t worry about that... Gently she touches Tweet’s cheek. We can’t worry about it, she says again” (238). When she suggests “talking lessons and listening lessons” Tweet pulls her arm away and turns away her head; breaks the physical connection. It seems presumptuous for Cornelia to suggest talking lessons for Tweet when it is she who has always needed them and still seems to be avoiding issues. Neither does she recognise yet that Tweet’s humming is a furious attempt to reply.

On another visit Cornelia’s corporal link with Tweet seems to hypnotise and entrance Cornelia. The division between her own and Tweet’s body is blurred. Helping Tweet manipulate her damaged hand in order to try and regain some feeling, Cornelia feels “all through her body” Tweet tapping her free hand to the beat of the music from the radio. She turns her entire focus on Tweet’s body. The massage that she gives Tweet seem sloving and sensual and she concentrates on what she is doing to the exclusion of all else: “She puts her hand on Tweet’s warm skin, begins to stroke the poor scarred twisted fingers, falls into a dream of stroking, touching, hardly knows that the children have given up, turned away” (246).

When the children exclaim their realisation that Tweet’s humming is an attempt to sing her feelings, Cornelia pauses to recognise the extent to which she had felt, yet failed to hear.
Tweet’s voice:

Cornelia lifts her hands from Tweet’s shoulders, stands still, still. The memory of the beat throbs in her body like the pulse of her blood.... You’re singing, she says. Oh, Tweet, my God.... All the time... you’ve been singing. (247)

While Cornelia had felt love and warmth, Tweet had been trying to communicate fury. Her first clear enunciation is a string of curses: “SHIT, SHIT, SHIT, Tweet sings, pounding the chair arm” (247). Yet although Cornelia has now heard Tweet’s voice and felt her body as though it were part of her own, it will take more time before she fully recognises Tweet’s anger towards her, or her anger towards Tweet.

In New York Cornelia had come to accept the extent to which she may have controlled her lack of hearing. She questioned: “Did I make myself deaf? Did I cement together the hammer and anvil and stirrup so that no vibration passed to the nerve?” (213). Falling on ice had knocked the control on her hearing aid revealing that she could actually hear the music she had previously blocked out. By the time she visited the ailing Tweet, she had decided to set her hearing aid to a level that made her highly conscious of sound: “Acutely aware of sound.... She even consciously hears from the kitchen the noise of the refrigerator fan and the faint continuous hiss of the glowing gas heater near which Tweet sits...” (232). The noise of her blouse moving against the hearing aid’s microphone is distracting, so for the first time she clips it to the outside of her clothes. The aid becomes a visible external sign of both her physical difficulty with hearing and her emotional desire to overcome that difficulty.

For Tweet the recognition of her attempts to communicate, and her discovered ability to speak through song, bring rapid healing. Tweet claims full responsibility for this recovery: “Bubble done gone, yeah, she chanted. I shrunk it down” (249). This positive psychology seems to overcome all the medical opinions which claimed that the aneurysm could not be reduced without surgery. Now that Tweet is speaking and Cornelia will listen the full weight of their anger and resentment can emerge:

Hated you, Tweet says... You ain’t got sense enough to know I hated you. I hate you
Damn you, then, Cornelia says. I hate you, too. (254)

The emphasis on the word 'sense' can be read quite literally to include all the levels on which Cornelia ignored Tweet. Yet despite this rage Cornelia calls attention to the link that has been forged between the women: “You can’t help it, no. Not what you’ve done for me or what I’ve done for you” (255). Tweet knows too that the anger that divides and the caring that connects exist side by side. Part of Tweet’s attitude is rooted in a broad hatred of all white women.

She hated Cornelia before she even met her because she hated all that her whiteness represented. However the novel does not situate oppressor and oppressed along a strict white/black dividing line. As Charles Fister puts it, both women experience difficulties with “totalitarian states of consciousness as represented by their respective parents, spouses children and cultures” (101). There are situations where both women are expected to keep silent, or put themselves second in relation to others. Tweet suffered as much from the actions of her father as from the greed of a white landowner. She is able to find some level of connection with Cornelia in terms of shared gender experience. She expresses this connection physically, reaching out to touch Cornelia’s hand; but her song expresses her ambiguous feelings: “Oh, I love you, baby, but I sure do hate your ways... I say, I love you, darlin, but I hate your treacherous low down ways” (256). The narrator’s concluding appeal to the two women, “Sing it, Tweet. Yeah. Sing it, Cornelia. Sing it.” suggests that the best way forwards is continuing expression and communication (256). The novel offers no easy solution; no neat conclusion. What is offered is a recognition of layers of difficulty which increase, rather than reduce, the complexity of the situation.

However, although the narrator of Ellen Douglas’s Can’t Quit You Baby attempts to be highly vigilant about her portrayal of the two central characters, Cornelia and Tweet, certain assumptions about them have been built into the text which perpetuate stereotypes that other aspects of the novel attempt to undermine. In relation to descriptions of the two women’s bodies, the narrator seems to have adopted attitudes about black and white women which have their roots in damaging stereotypes of slave society ideologies.
The narrator's apprehensions about fairly conveying the complexities of the women's story is clear from the beginning. As the novel progresses she discusses her difficulties in telling the story and expresses her concern about how her identity will affect her perspective. At one point another voice intrudes and implies the narrator's specific identity: "You may have assumed that she is a white woman. But perhaps you've not yet thought how difficult it is for her to be true to her tale" (38). Yet through most of the text the narrator remains a disembodied voice and this draws attention to the specific embodiment of the two protagonists. Towards the conclusion of the novel the narrator's anxiety reaches a stage where she doubts her ability to go on and has to acknowledge the biases in her account of these lives. She points out how much Tweet's story has been heard in relation to Cornelia's and the context in which it has been heard: "I thought I was at home in Tweet's life, that when she spoke, I heard her speak with her own authentic voice. But of course I never heard her speak, except to Cornelia. Does that trouble you as it does me?" (239). The narrator's assessment is primarily concerned with how much is communicated about the characters through the telling of their stories. She questions how and when each woman's voice has been given narrative space. What does not seem to have been questioned here is any bias in the presentation of the characters' appearances. Cornelia's deafness and Tweet's aneurysm are discussed and indicate their psychological difficulties with listening and storytelling. What it is interesting to return to is the narrator's initial portrayal, not of their senses, but other aspects of their corporeal place in the world. It may be that the concluding reassessments are intended to include this aspect of the presentation. However, issues of body image are not specifically addressed in the same way as the issue of body language. As other ideas based on restrictive assumptions are thoroughly interrogated during the course of the novel this neglected opportunity for questioning becomes a significant omission. The way that the visual impact of the two women's bodies is presented to the reader is problematic not simply for what is included, but just as importantly for the discussion that is omitted.

Interestingly the narrator claims to be comfortable with her presentation of Tweet: # "Curious, I had no problem with your seeing Tweet" (39). It is Cornelia’s appearance that she
seems uncertain of her ability to convey. An investigation of representations of the women reveals that there are problems with what the reader ‘sees’. The narrator’s depictions employ stereotypical images and assumptions about them and Cornelia is described at greater length and in greater depth than Tweet. The first comment about either woman’s looks is made by Tweet, commenting on herself when she was younger. She seems confident and realistic: “I was good-looking then. Didn’t get these bad risings scarred my face until I was nearly thirty. My skin was smooth. Never did have good hair, but you got to admit even now I got good legs” (7). It is not this passage itself which is problematic; but when it is juxtaposed with other comments about, and interpretations of, Tweet’s and Cornelia’s looks, difficulties arise. The first description of Cornelia appears shortly afterwards. Cornelia does not speak about herself, but is described by the narrator. The distanced passivity which this suggests and the beauty which the excerpt describes are both developed in subsequent passages: “And Cornelia still has a blue-eyed, fresh-faced beauty, looks nearer thirty-four than forty-four. Her thick chestnut hair is untouched by gray and her pale skin marked lightly by time and weather” (13). In Tweet’s description of herself she comments on both the attractive and unattractive features of her body. Describing Cornelia the narrator picks out only what is attractive about her and the features which are especially noticeable, her hair and skin, provide a positive to Tweet’s negative.

What is particularly striking about these two descriptions is the contrast between Tweet’s “scarred” face and Cornelia’s “fresh-faced beauty” and “pale skin marked lightly by time”. This contrast is intensified later in the novel when the two women’s faces are seen in immediate proximity to each other. Telling Cornelia about her knowledge of evil spirits and her awareness that the power of the dead is in the place where they die, Tweet moves her face close to Cornelia’s to stress her point: “Tweet leaned across the kitchen table, her dark scarred face close to Cornelia’s smooth white one.... The dead live, she said, gazing with those strange blue eyes... into Cornelia’s eyes” (26). These descriptions of Tweet’s scars and Cornelia’s smooth skin can be read as symbolic of Tweet’s experience of life and her willingness to be open about her difficulties, in contrast to Cornelia’s sheltered life and
attempts to hide or ignore all imperfections. Tweet’s emotional as well as her physical scars are visible while Cornelia attempts to present a clean slate to the world.

What is also implied however is that the black woman is intimidating. She becomes the frightening black Other, made mysterious by her belief in evil spirits and ghosts. Tweet discusses her belief in the power of the dead openly with Cornelia who is extremely uncomfortable with such talk and highly sceptical of it. Tweet’s insistence on talking about what disturbs Cornelia and Cornelia’s attempts not to hear her are discussed by the narrator. She critiques herself for only allowing the reader to hear Tweet talk of such things with Cornelia. What remains open to question here is the physical portrayal of Tweet which accompanies her words. The black woman’s appearance is dubiously situated to reinforce a sense of foreboding.

An interesting twist of meaning related to skin colouring occurs later in the novel with a description of Tweet’s skin healing after a burn: “the new skin is an ugly strange pinkish color” (241). It is as though under Tweet’s black skin, white skin is revealed. However there is something disturbing about this new colouring; it is strange and ugly and quite a different colour from Cornelia’s pale skin and smooth whiteness. Charles Fister argues that the role reversal which occurs when Cornelia becomes Tweet’s caregiver, after Tweet’s accident, “manifests itself in the metaphor of a pink scar that rises to the surface of Tweet’s black skin” (108). He states that “This pink scar reveals how beneath the layers of racial difference, the two women are the same” (108). If this is the case, then the way the metaphor functions is troubling: is it implying that Tweet’s acceptability lies in the fact that she is really white underneath? Even then, she cannot achieve the perfect whiteness that is the colour of Cornelia’s unblemished skin.

In this context it is interesting to reconsider the significance of Tweet’s eye colour. Tweet’s eyes are double rings of blue and the whites are “tinged with a blue as pure as the sky” (7). Taking this image together with the pinkness beneath Tweet’s dark skin suggests an uneasy shift towards constructing Tweet’s physicality as white underneath. Tweet’s blue eyes and pink scar draw attention to themselves as marks of difference from the construction of
absolute blackness. It could be read here that Cornelia’s connection with Tweet is tempered by the common elements of white physicality that they share. Creating Tweet’s acceptability in terms of white associated physicality has disturbing implications for the values attached to black physicality. Is this glimpse of racechange a suggestion of the unreliability of strict racial definitions or an expression of anxiety about the permissibility of a black woman’s connection with her white employer?

It is the case that this image disturbs the certainty of racial difference that supposedly dictates the power balance between Tweet and Cornelia. One of the novel’s motifs is that of skimming over the surface. This is related to any refusal to look properly at difficult issues. The novel contains numerous images of layers and surfaces, and of skating over ice or skiing over water. If Tweet and Cornelia's bodies are read in this context then looking beneath the skin's surface reveals skin colouring as a simplistic and limiting categorisation. If racial difference in terms of distinct colouring is unreliable then other aspects of their different roles are called into question. Such questioning does occur in the text but the continuing veneration of Cornelia's physicality reveals the unevenness of that inquiry.

Focusing once more on Tweet’s original description of herself, it is interesting to examine how the narrator interprets this later in the novel:

Curious, I had no problem with your seeing Tweet - her round face, pitted and scarred by the risings she spoke of; her wide, powerful nose; her hair, thin and skimpy (Never did have good hair); her legs, dark brown, slender, muscular and shapely, built to escape Wayne Jones and the devil.... (39)

The narrator picks up again the image of Tweet’s “pitted and scarred” face as well as her comments about her hair. What has also happened here is that Tweet’s description of her legs has been given a different perspective. Tweet says simply that she “got good legs”. The narrator enhances this description by adding that they are “built to escape Wayne Jones and the devil”. This is the key phrase: Tweet’s legs are useful to her, not in a positive sense or for their own value, but in relation to white men and evil. The two ideas which the narrator uses in her interpretation of Tweet’s body relate to stories Tweet has told Cornelia. This reinforces
the idea, introduced by the slant of the narrative, that Tweet functions primarily in relation to the actions of white people.

This retelling of Tweet's description of her body is provided to remind the reader that they can visualize Tweet but as yet have no clear picture of Cornelia. This is inconsistent as there has already been a descriptive passage about Cornelia. The narrator seems to feel that much more is needed to convey Cornelia's physical persona, whereas the concise passage about Tweet is sufficient. What follows is a description of Cornelia's stateliness. There is a clear sense of regality and even superiority, combined with the impression of distance and aloofness: "So, now - Cornelia: Do you notice that she stands slightly swayback, as if she's lifted her shoulders like a queen ready to receive the heavy, ermine-trimmed mantle she must wear to the coronation?" (39). Like royalty, Cornelia feels she must also present a positive, charming side to the world. Whereas it is Tweet's eyes which seem to say so much about her character, it is Cornelia's mouth which the narrator feels presents a crucial aspect of Cornelia: "She has a wide-lipped, generous mouth that resists what seems to me its nature - the impulse to irony and tolerance and sorrow - a mouth that refuses to turn down, that always wears a kindly smile..." (39). Cornelia's body conspires with her in a denial of genuine feeling. Her body becomes a front with which she can achieve her desire of keeping herself in a place cut off from the world.

Having given glimpses of Cornelia and Tweet in the present the narrator moves on to imagine their adolescence. The description of Tweet is grounded in a recognisable youthful body: "Tweet I see not only in her middle age but as a smooth-skinned adolescent, her round face with still a trace of childishness in the uncertain chin, the plump arms (her grandpa's darling), but in her eyes, already, shrewdness and resolution" (39-40). Once again the presentation of Tweet in itself provides no cause for concern about the portrayal of the black subject. Very clearly, however, no passage of the novel can be read in isolation from the others. The occasion for questioning this depiction of Tweet's adolescent body arises once more in relation to the contrast it creates with the way Cornelia's youth is envisioned. After having described Tweet the narrator asks: "Shall we try to see Cornelia, too, in her youth?".
yet she seems unable to provide the same simple sketch of bodily development just provided for Tweet (40). Instead, the narrator focuses on the details of an incident during Cornelia’s childhood that caused her to withdraw from her body. At the age of nine, being punished for an unspecified offence, Cornelia seems to remove herself emotionally from the impact of the physical assault: “it’s as if during the switching her face acquires its poised, grown-up expression....This absurd occasion is something first to ignore and then to blot out” (40). Cornelia’s adolescent body is negated. In an attempt to maintain her dignity she shifts towards adult detachment, leaving her body behind.

When the narrator does detail Cornelia’s adolescent body it is not in the direct and concise language which she uses for Tweet. Instead the language is verbose and makes use of allusion to fairy tale and classical myth. The narrator places Cornelia, for the purposes of describing her, in her room in the third story of an octagonal tower attached to her parents’ house. Cornelia becomes the princess in the tower. This approach seems both to increase the sense of Cornelia’s distance from her body and to hold her body up as spectacle of beauty to the world: “I see her, unconscious of the picture she makes, leaning on her hand in the open window of her room in the classic pose of the dreaming young girl, looking down into the shady street below” (71). Shortly afterwards the narrator repeats and enhances this image, emphasising its impact: “What could be more romantic than the sight of a young girl sitting in the morning sunshine in her tower bedroom brushing her hair?” (72). It is claimed that there are no suitors to gaze up at her, for the young men she meets are discouraged by her quiet, serious, aloof nature. Cornelia’s beauty seems to exist in a vacuum, thus placing the accent on her purity. Yet this claim is somewhat contradicted by the knowledge that her husband, John, was attracted to her by the vision she created in her tower. The insistence on the fairy-tale figure however allows her to retain a degree of unworldliness: “I saw you sitting in the tower window, he said, brushing your hair like Rapunzel!” (77).

Cornelia becomes elevated to a position of physical superiority by her extreme beauty, about which the narrator waxes lyrical:

Sunlight glints off the strong copper threads of her hair and softly illuminates the
childish curves of adolescent flesh that mask the strength of chin and cheekbone and slightly aquiline nose. ...the heavy graceful curls lying like marble on her broad forehead; the fine thin nose with a slight dent in the bridge, between her wide-set eyes; the lips pressed so firmly, yet sensitively against each other.... (71-2)

The extent to which she extols Cornelia's virtues gives rise to queries about the narrator's purpose in insisting on her perfection. It also creates discomfort with regard to the uneven degree to which attention is bestowed on Cornelia and Tweet's looks. Increasingly disturbing is the association between Cornelia's looks and her position of power. The previous extracts introduce the idea of classical civilisations: the "aquiline nose" and "curls lying like marble" suggest classical statues. This notion is confirmed with subsequent direct references to Greek and Roman myth: "Not the purity of Praxiteles, but something later, touched by Rome with the knowledge of the nature of power. Yes, she is beautiful - and strong" (72). Here is the direct link between Cornelia's physical existence as a beautiful young white woman and her hegemony.

The idea of Cornelia's beauty and her literal elevation above the common crowd has clear echoes of a more recent figure of cultural myth: the Southern belle. The depiction of the juvenile Cornelia runs in clear parallel with the conception of a lovely, untainted woman, residing on a metaphoric pedestal, that is the stereotype of the belle. This connection is reinforced by the idea that Cornelia is guileless, unaware of her allure: "She seemed unaware - no matter that her reserve included intelligence and resourcefulness - of the power of her own beauty, her sexuality" (71). This presentation of Cornelia seems to fix her firmly in association with the dilemmas of the southern past which still inform the relations between herself and Tweet. With this in mind it is startling to return to an earlier comment about Tweet. Following her summary of Tweet's teenage appearance the narrator added a further comment about how she perceived Tweet later in life: "And I see her as a passionate lover, an outraged woman, although I'm not yet sure where the tales of her life will lead us" (40). In context this comment totters dangerously on the brink of stereotype, casting Tweet as the black sexual being in relation to Cornelia's virtuous ideal of white womanhood.

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Persistent perceptions of black women as excessively sexually active are rooted in the slavocracy's racist justifications of white moral and physical superiority. Sander L. Gilman has discussed in depth the development in the nineteenth century of the association of black women with forthright sexuality. He traces the interactions of scientific investigations and visual representations which reinforced the myth of black female deviant sexuality. Hazel V. Carby, in her essay on the ideologies of mistress and slave, insists on the importance of recognising the stereotype of the lascivious black woman constructed in relation to the notion of white women's purity:

the figurations of black women existed in an antithetical relationship with the values embodied in the cult of true womanhood, an absence of the qualities of piety and purity being a crucial signifier. Black womanhood was polarized against white womanhood in the structure of the metaphoric system of female sexuality, particularly through the association of black women with overt sexuality and taboo sexual practices. (32)

While other aspects of the depiction of the two women resist such a formulation, in the portrayal of the women's bodies the tendency towards this regressive conception of identity clearly surfaces. Even in a text so alert to its own positionality, the influence of slavery's constructions of bodies remains.

What it is remarkable to note at this juncture then is that Douglas's most direct reworking of the figure of the southern belle plays a mediatory role in relation to the oppositional depictions of Tweet and Cornelia's bodies. Willie Belle, Cornelia's son Andrew's wife, acts as a foil to Cornelia, and, to some degree, Tweet. It is made clear that Willie Belle has a southern background; she is the daughter, grand-daughter and great grand-daughter of southern Methodists: “Where did she spring from? Well, she sprang from the same place Tennessee Williams and many another bewildered and fearless southern soul sprang from - the rectory. Only in her case it's a Methodist parsonage” (141). Her name insists on her origins, although its implausibility necessitates confirmation: “Willie Belle (yes, that's her name)” (132). However, she is not still stranded on the pedestal of southern
womanhood. She has rejected all but the smallest mannerisms of this past and has done so with humour and humanity. She is the fallen belle who now accepts, even welcomes, the confusion of modern life: "Like Tennessee Williams’s Alma, Willie Belle had got to smoking at an early age and slipped precipitately down the broad path to perdition, leaving her family behind, taking along only her good table manners and soft, cultivated southern voice to confuse the bystanders" (142).

Willie Belle’s body is the antithesis of that expected of a southern belle, yet it is portrayed positively. Willie Belle is fat, gloriously, splendidly fat. This is the first thing we learn about her body: “One thing - she’s large.... Large and soft and dark, with resilient olive skin and eyes the color of Cornelia’s eggplants” (139). The second thing to notice, as is clear from this extract, is that her colour is not the whitest white required for the purity of the southern belle. Yet she is portrayed not as flawed or unattractive but as a woman of great beauty by European standards. Like Cornelia, Willie Belle’s beauty is given validity by allusion to celebrated works of western art. In Willie Belle’s case this is seventeenth-century European painting, particularly Rembrant’s and Rubens’ pictures of their young wives.

Andrew, looking at her, “thinks of Saskia in her bath. He thinks of Rubens’ young wife with the fur draped around her naked body” (140). Also in conflict with the figure her name and background recalls is the portrayal of Willie Belle as a joyfully sexual woman. The following scene emphasises her enjoyment of her sexuality and her comfort with her size:

She stretched her brown body like a big cat, rolled over on top of Andrew, propped herself on her elbows, and let her hair fall around his face.

My God, you’re heavy, he said.

Heavy, Willie Belle said, pressing her pelvis against his and gazing into his eyes. Oh, I am. I’m heavy. She moved gently against him. It’s love, love, love, she said, bearing down. (142)

Willie Belle’s depiction as a sexual being means that it is not only the central black woman who is presented as a “passionate lover”. However, references to her olive skin and brown body disconnect sexual expression from white womanhood. Sexuality remains associated
with darkness.

What is discomforting in this novel is the imbalance that arises when the portrayal of a character like Willie Belle, who challenges notions about a restrictive stereotype, co-exists with representations that collude with stereotypes. The presentation of Willie Belle as an accepting, mediatory figure is revealing. After the sudden death of Cornelia’s husband, Willie Belle is patient with Cornelia’s grieving process. Cornelia is coming to terms not just with the death of her husband, but with the realisation that she has spent her life in denial. Willie Belle provides a comforting presence in Cornelia’s time of difficulty: “It’s as if she tries to interpose her warm dark peaceful bulk between Cornelia and whatever nightmare gallops with wild eyes, dark mane, and bared teeth across her sky…” (162). Part of Cornelia’s problem, although she has not begun to accept it yet, is her attitude to her working relationship and friendship with Tweet. It is striking that it is Willie Belle’s “warm dark” body that eases Cornelia’s process of facing the wild-eyed, dark-maned creature of her doubts.

The contradiction presented by the idea of Willie Belle’s dark body as comforting, in response to fears of a dark creature, reflects the contradiction at the heart of the novel. That contradiction is the persistent conflict between black and white women despite moves towards reconciliation. The strength of such conflict is powerfully expressed both by the portrayal of the characters' physical existences and body language, and by the failure of the text to fully move beyond deep-rooted associations in relation to black and white embodiment.

Ellen Douglas’s novel intelligently explores the complex issues affecting the relationship between a black woman and the white woman for whom she works. It carefully presents the co-existence of bonding, based on gendered experience, and mistrust, prejudice and anger, created by race and class divisions. The dilemmas of conveying such a situation, and the difficulties of communicating the two women’s voices, are explicitly addressed. The exploration of such a power dynamic is reinforced by the construction of the women’s corporeal identity: their attitudes to it and ways of using their physicality to express themselves. The ways that the women’s interactions are affected by racial assumptions are communicated by their responses to each other’s embodiment. This is echoed by the narrative
which, although highly vigilant about the portrayal of Cornelia and Tweet, makes implicit connections between specific racial embodiment, sexuality, beauty and power. These assumptions perpetuate limiting notions of identity, originating in justifications of slavery, which other aspects of the novel successfully undermine.
Chapter Four

One Dark Body? Issues of Biraciality and Self-Possession

in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*

Gloria Naylor has given the heroine of her novel *Mama Day* the name Cocoa. I want to begin with a consideration of the wonderful ambiguity of that name. What colour is cocoa? Should we visualise the dark red-brown colour of the pod, the soft brown of the powdered bean or the milkiness of the confection? All three are suggested and many possible variations in between: Cocoa’s name evades fixed images of any one colour. This situation is further complicated by the realisation that Cocoa is not actually cocoa-coloured, but rather, is described as “tinted from amber to cream” and later “the color of buttered cream” (27, 29).

Cocoa’s birth name was Ophelia but her grandmother and great aunt gave her the pet name early on, joking that “It’ll put color on her somewhere” (39). Despite this, Cocoa remains unhappily aware of her pale skin and the fact that it is the external indicator that she is the descendent of a white man and a black woman: the slave-owner Bascombe Wade and the slave Sapphira. Much of the novel focuses on Cocoa’s need to come to terms with the miscegenation of her ancestors and this process focuses on her acceptance of her colour and her body.

It is interesting to consider at this point, the description of Sapphira, Cocoa’s ancestor, that opens the novel: “Everybody knows but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade. A true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her” (3). Although Cocoa understands that her forebear was a black woman the exact nature of that blackness is unfixed: it is interpreted and visualised differently by different people. Mama Day’s later attribution of Cocoa’s pale colouring as much to Sapphira as to Bascombe with her assertion that “it’s only an ancient mother of pure black that one day spits out this kinda gold”, further complicates the association between skin colour and racial heritage. Naylor’s introduction of such elements of
uncertainty in the physical depictions of Sapphira and Cocoa undercuts ideas of physicality as a stable site of identity. As Karen Sanchez-Eppler explains in her discussion of the intersecting rhetorics of the body in feminism and abolition: “If the body is an inescapable sign of identity, it is also an insecure and often illegible sign” (15). This is especially true, she notes, with the “multiple challenges” to fixed ideas about racial identity presented by the bodies of mixed race offspring (32).

Sanchez-Eppler’s focus is on sentimental fiction and she is aware that the use of the mulatto, quadroon or octoroon character is a racist strategy “to mask the alien African blackness” it purports to represent (33). Yet she feels that awareness of this racism should not foreclose a discussion of the obsession with the fictionalised mulatto but draw attention to the dilemmas implicated by its existence. She asserts that the naming which marks out the “ever less visible black ancestry” of the individual is also a record of repeated generations of sanctioned abuse of black women by white men (33). Herein lies the terrible predicament for someone of mixed race coming to terms with their own self, for “the recognition of ownership of one’s own body as essential to claiming personhood is matched by the fear of being imprisoned, silenced, deprived of personhood by that same body” (33). These conflicting attitudes towards one’s body, towards oneself, are at the heart of Cocoa’s feelings of anger, denial and resentment about her own body. She attempts to ignore completely those aspects of herself which do not coincide with her understanding of what it is to be a black woman. It is the fissures within her, created by such denial, that are where the anxiety and jealousy take root and nearly destroy her. Cocoa’s journey towards self-possession involves confronting the implications that possession of one person by another in her past continue to have in her present. This final chapter then, interrogates aspects of corporeal identity which undercut notions of discrete racial identity explored in previous texts. It also explores the way ideas about race and gender hierarchy are exploded by Cocoa’s ancestry of a black slave woman who asserted her authority over her white slaveowner.

Having unsettled attempts to perceive Cocoa and Sapphira in terms of fixed colour, Naylor’s portrayal of the past that Cocoa must come to terms with unsettles ideas about fixed
oppositions within slavery, about the white/black, oppressor/oppressed paradigm. The depictions of Cocoa's ancestors Bascombe and Sapphira, slave-owner and slave, revise notions of hierarchy and power. Sapphira's autonomy and self-possession exist in contrast to Bascombe's personal losses and flawed understanding. Cocoa feels extremely troubled about the heritage she thinks she embodies. However, the text proposes that she needs to rethink her assumptions about her ancestry.

Recognising that anxiety about a mixed race persona is inherently connected with body image, this chapter will explore how Cocoa’s emotional journey towards recognition of her cultural identity is played out to a large degree in relation to her physical self. Naylor’s work at once challenges notions of identity grounded in the body and at the same time explores the impact that prescriptive notions about black or white physicality have on an individual who inhabits a certain body. Cocoa’s antagonism towards, difficulties with, and necessary acceptance of her past are expressed in the depiction of her physical condition, illness, near death and eventual healing. With its portrayal of illness the text carries suggestions of the association between mixed race identity and impurity. The conception of an uncertain racial identity as some form of disease, instilled in Cocoa’s perception at a young age, is expressive of anxiety about her identity. Cocoa clearly feels that whiteness is something she is contaminated with. Ultimately though she must move past her conception of antagonistic binary oppositions towards an integrated sense of self.

Exploring issues around Cocoa’s physical identity highlights the way the text challenges and reinterprets ideas about, and memories of, the slaveholding past. However, it will be argued here that despite the insistence on revision, the portrayal of Cocoa’s embodiment still retains certain assumptions about mixed race identity as situated predominantly on one side or the other of a marked colour line. The novel explores ideas about whether identity is located in the mind or the body and debates the level of autonomy that can be achieved if the mind is privileged over the body. Yet there are occasions when Cocoa’s cultural knowledge and historical memories are clearly grounded in her physicality. What is revealing is that these embodied memories are associated entirely with an African and
African American past. If Cocoa's body does function to store and reveal her cultural inheritance, then where is an expression of the European culture which her mixed race body recalls? While destabilising the visibility and certainty of fixed racial identity the novel still constructs Cocoa’s ambiguous physicality as having fixed racial and related cultural references.

While several other critics have examined Naylor's reassessment of historical assumptions and attitudes to the past, especially in relation to the mixed race offspring of that past, none have done so in relation to negotiations of physicality. In her essay on the reconstruction of American history in Mama Day, Helene Christol argues that through ideas about claiming land and genealogy Naylor challenges the conventions and restrictions of conventional, white biased, accounts of American history. Paula Gallant Eckard also studies Naylor's approach to the past and its powerful influence on collective experience and individual memory. Her assertion is that the novel's concern is not so much with preserving the past, but with examining, deconstructing, and ultimately redefining the past” (121). Like Christol, Susan Meisenhelder is concerned with the novel's reclaiming of the history of black experience from “attempts by the white world to order, control and define black people” (405). What is also interesting about Naylor's novel of course is the redefinition of white intentions and white/black power relations. It is the novel's concern with offering multiple perspectives on the past which interests Missy Dehn Kubitschek in her discussion of the novel. She argues that the novel not only redefines the past but explores the interaction between past and present. By avoiding a search for a single truth she claims that the novel “foregoes the solid satisfactions of a fixed truth of tribal experience in favor of a flexible, usable historical fiction” (81). In this chapter I aim to extend this ongoing examination of Naylor's negotiations with the past to include her construction of Cocoa's physicality as a site of informative ambiguity. Ideas about mind and body connections, embodied memory and self-possession lead to reassessments of historical racial interactions while new perspectives on the slaveholding past insist on revaluations of what mixed race physicality signifies.

The present time of Gloria Naylor's Mama Day is 1999, from which vantage point
three alternating narrative voices recount the events, taking place in New York City and the south-east coast sea island of Willow Springs, leading up to the summer of 1985. The three voices are comprised of Cocoa and her husband George, in conversation with each other; and a voice that speaks collectively for the people of Willow Springs and narrates the perspective of Mama Day herself in the third person. What is especially interesting about the narrative is that George met his death in Willow Springs that summer fourteen years ago and so the conversation between Cocoa and George is that between a woman and the spirit of her dead husband. Cocoa and George’s dialectic is an attempt to come to terms with the issues, both personal and collective, which arise from the island’s slave heritage, the relationship between a white slave-owner and a slave woman, the deeding of the island to her children and the woman’s mythical return to Africa. What will be explored here are the ways in which their debate is echoed by Cocoa’s experience of her own body, a dialectic within her body, between black and white, or as Du Bois has so famously described it: “two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (5). The culmination of events that crucial summer is a devastating illness that overtakes Cocoa and this illness seems to be an expression of internal conflict which can only heal when she and George are reconciled to their ambiguous heritage.

What is highly apparent from the start in Naylor’s construction of Cocoa’s physicality, is her extreme sensitivity about her colouring. Our introduction to Cocoa is set against the backdrop of New York city, where she lives and works. Applying for a job, she sums up her chances in terms of what her body lacks: “Forget it, I thought, you’re standing here with... no ass and no color” (20). Although George’s memory of her is in terms of colour: “reddish-brown hair”, “skin that’s tinted from amber to cream”, Cocoa defines her self as having “no color”. Her response to her paleness is to negate the colour that her body actually is. The idea then of the invisibility of whiteness as something which creates whiteness as superior by normalising it, is disturbed by the connection Cocoa makes between pale skin and negativity. At the same time she is expressing rejection of blackness that she feels is not dark enough to be truly black. Her comment is made in the context of her
cynicism about applying for a job, comparing herself with the other candidates and assessing her physical appearance in terms of sexuality as well as colour. Yet her comment reveals a personal anxiety about her skin tone that crops up repeatedly and is connected with underlying anxiety about her authenticity as a black woman.

More is revealed about Cocoa’s attitude in a later conversation that she has with George. He is appalled by her habit of categorising strangers in terms of food and challenges her on it: “fudge sticks, kumquats, bagels, zucchinis... your whole litany has turned the people in this city into material for a garbage disposal. And I’m just wondering why you do that?” (62) Cocoa explains that this is a defensive response which helps her mentally organise the chaos of the big city as opposed to the simplicity she perceives as existing in Willow Springs, her childhood home. For her New York presents “a whole kaleidoscope of people” and continues “nothing’s just black and white here like in Willow Springs” (63). She presents the South’s racial organisation as easy to comprehend, divided either side of a distinct color line, in comparison with the multi-ethnicity of the north that has resulted from immigration. She seems here to have put aside thoughts of the ambiguity and difficulties of mixed race of which she herself has personal experience.

Yet if she does see the population of Willow Springs only in terms of black and white it explains her extreme anxiety about where she fits into that group. For Cocoa her colour, or lack of it, made her feel inadequate and disadvantaged when she was a child: “It was awful growing up, looking the way I did, on an island of soft brown girls, or burnished ebony girls with their flashing teeth against that deep satin skin” (232). Cocoa tells how the other children’s spite and name-calling intimidated her: “It was torture competing with girls like that. And if some brave soul wanted to take me out, they would tell him that I had some rare disease that was catching” (233). In some contexts an element of whiteness in an individual’s racial makeup is read as a mark of superiority and privilege, as Cocoa discovers when she lives and works in New York. Yet the attitude that Cocoa encounters as a child is that pale skin is not authentic; that it is a mark of impurity and physical dysfunction. Her peers’ comments provide an early association of Cocoa’s physicality with disease; an association
that will vividly manifest itself later in her life. Another example of Cocoa’s anxiety about her skin colour and its implications is recalled by Mama Day: “She remembers the little girl running home crying and almost taking off her middle finger with a butcher knife, fearing she really had the white blood she was teased about at school - she wanted red blood like everyone else” (48). Cocoa takes literally the physical internalisation of her white ancestry and again this internalisation will have devastating effects later. It is also worth noting that in her desperation to confront her worst fears about her body and to discover the extent of her body’s difference, Cocoa simultaneously seems to disconnect from that body. As a result of the taunts from her peer group, Cocoa does not trust or respond positively to those who see her pale colour as an advantage.

On one of Cocoa’s return visits to Willow Springs, however, Mama Day is surprised by her great niece’s appearance, and experiences a new understanding of what Cocoa’s colouring could signify. Mama Day’s comments are fascinating for the way that they further confuse connections between colour and identity, and rework meanings attached to colour, light and the difference between black and white. Mama Day perceives Cocoa’s pale colour and the light that surrounds her body as an expression of her blackness:

When did it happen - this kind of blooming from pale to gold?... now she strides so proud, a sunflower against the brown arms over hers, the sweat flowing from the reddish gold hair and absorbing every bit of available light to fling it back against those high cheekbones, down the collarbone, on the line of the pelvis.... The lean thighs, tight hips, the long strides flashing light between the blur of strong legs - pure black. (47-8)

Mama Day decides that this luminescent golden colouring does not necessarily acknowledge her white ancestor but rather that Cocoa “brings back the great, grand Mother” and the power of “18 & 23 black” (48). 1823 was the year that Sapphira persuaded Bascombe Wade to deed his land to her descendants, thereby inverting the power of owner over slave. In Cocoa’s golden colouring, that takes in and reflects back light, Mama Day sees an indication of Cocoa's having descended not from the man who tried to exert power but the woman who
threw off that external control. Mama Day reaches new conclusions about those who mock Cocoa’s colouring: “Them silly children didn’t know that it’s the white in us that reflects all these shades of brown running around Willow Springs. But pure black woulda sucked it all in - and it’s only an ancient mother of pure black that one day spits out this kinda gold” (48).

Mama Day re-evaluates associations between colour, ancestry and power. Cocoa, however, has a long and painful process to endure before she can shift her own oppositional thinking to incorporate such revisions and new ways of perceiving.

When the time arrives for Cocoa to return to Willow Springs for a party to introduce George to the people she grew up with, she is very nervous. She wants to be dark skinned so that she can meet them on equal colour terms and so uses makeup to darken her complexion, in this way seeming to utilise a form of black face; giving a black mask to her pale skin. 

Cocoa is attempting to create a clear and certain racial identity. She is trying to bridge the gap between what Samira Kawash terms “visibility” and “knowability”:

The possibility that the body which is meant to reflect transparently its inner truth, may in fact be a misrepresentation and that its meaning may be illegible threatens the collapse of the system of racial ordering.... Thus, the stability of discrete racial identities is based not only on visibility but on knowability. (132)

The system of racial ordering is used to guarantee “the hierarchical distribution of social, political and economic opportunity” in favour of whites. This is something which Cocoa is highly aware of and which she rejects. It is because of this antagonism towards white power that it is so important for her to emphasise her identity as a black woman. Yet she therefore moves towards reinforcing the binary oppositions of black and white upon which the hierarchy depends. She wants to ensure that, rather than inadvertently passing for white, the black ancestry which she knows is made visible. With her use of makeup Cocoa moves towards a performance of blackness. Susan Gubar, in her complex and sophisticated exploration of race change strategies, has stated that for the mixed race child “the offspring’s out-of-place, uncanny complexion means that race change - not merely an impersonation, not volitional - ceases to be playful, speculative, or temporary...” (206). Yet the subject is still
able to enter into negotiations of racechange, whether through passing as white or attempting to appear black(er). George recognises Cocoa’s dilemma but is not sympathetic towards her anxiety. Cocoa knows what she is doing but wants his complicity: “Of course that foundation wasn’t the right shade, but couldn’t you lie?” (233) She wants to deny her mixed race ancestry, but is self conscious of her own colorchange performance. She is furious that George draws attention to it, for in this way he completely undermines her attempted authenticity.

George’s commentary is about her ambivalence towards her body and he demands her acceptance of her situation and of her actual colour. In the heat of the argument that breaks out with Cocoa about her use of makeup, George asks for a level of acceptance, of self-knowledge and identification that is beyond Cocoa’s grasp. As Cocoa goads him about his ideal woman, he retaliates that “any kind that knows what she is would be an improvement” (235). For Cocoa to know “what she is” requires taking on board a self-knowledge which encompasses a heritage of loss, confusion and pain. She would have to reach a level of reconciliation that would be in conflict with the oppositional way she perceives identity. Cocoa tries to mark herself as distinctively on one side of the black/white colour line. She is unable to function within the ambivalent space of mixed race identity and wants to reinscribe her skin as unquestionably black. Ironically George’s hypothetical ideal woman is “deep, deep brown” but his previous, and much cherished, girlfriend was a white woman. Cocoa feels herself stuck between these two poles, attempting to be the former, hostile to the latter, in denial that she embodies both.

Samira Kawash’s critical study *Dislocating the Color Line* is pertinent here, as she explores the difficulty of mapping an actual boundary between black and white. The impossibility of locating any fixed border reveals the arbitrary nature of clearly defined racial opposites. By focusing on the space between supposedly distinct racial identities Kawash aims to expose: “the boundary itself, not simply as that which must be crossed over or crossed out, but as simultaneously limit and possibility” (21). Kawash further argues that hybridity
can be understood not as something that overrides or goes beyond a boundary of difference but as a position located at the site of the boundary: “If hybridity is mixture, it is also the in-between, an in-between that cannot appear as a positive alternative but whose eruption denaturalises the natural stuff on either side” (21). Cocoa’s attempt to fix herself on one side of a clear racial divide, by naming and painting herself as black, clearly demonstrates that she is not naturally situated in any one place. Her ambiguous racial identity places her “in-between”, in a place of uncertainty she cannot tolerate. Her body is not the reliable indicator of identity she longs for it to be.

It is important to Cocoa to identify herself as a black woman. George says to her: “You were always very sensitive about your complexion, going out of your way to stress that you were a black woman if someone was about to mistake you for a Spaniard or a Creole” (219). George has a different attitude to Cocoa’s colour than she does herself. He feels it is her mannerisms, behaviour and attitude which make her recognisably a black woman, concluding; “you were, in spirit at least, as black as they come” (219). This raises questions in regard to the extent that Cocoa feels her cultural identity is located in her physical features. For Cocoa, the lack of complete physical expression of her blackness is such a difficult issue. For George the issue is his lack of a personal, familial past. He is aware of her discomfort with the colour of her skin, but he feels strongly that at least she has a past; a history that she can geographically locate, a heritage that is literally “intact and solid enough to be able to walk over the same ground that your grandfather did...”(219). Furthermore, he tells Cocoa: “Even your shame was a privilege few of us had. We could only look at our skin tones and guess. At least you knew” (219). George fully appreciates that Cocoa’s discomfort with her colour is her awareness that she is the descendant of a black slave woman and the white man who purchased her. Her ancestors represent both sides of the slave system. Within her body, white blends with black and this enforces her awareness of the enslavement in her past. George tells her “you could have easily descended from that slave woman who talked a man out of a whole island. But you hated to think about the fact that you might also be carrying a bit of him” (219).
However, the heritage Cocoa embodies, the legacy left to her by her ancestors, is one that challenges assumptions of black women's victimisation and dispossession. The novel's depiction of Sapphira and Bascombe Wade's relationship is a far more complex study of power relations than that understood by the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy. The documents which preface the novel; a map, a family tree and a bill of sale, allude to the sociological realities of slavery which this fiction responds to. The bill of sale pertains to Bascombe Wade's purchase of Sapphira and its details are testimony to her rebellious nature: “said Sapphira is half prime, inflicted with sullenness and entertains a bilious nature” (1). For the purposes of sale Sapphira is considered to be flawed, but with regard to her value as a person she is clearly strong and resolute. Sapphira is not regarded by the present generation as having been a slave because she defied being owned or controlled and she willed freedom for her descendants.

Sapphira's power was drawn from her ability to keep the fact of her enslaved body separate from the freedom of her spirit, her strong will. This determined strategy for survival allowed her a powerful sense of dignity. She understood, unlike Bascombe Wade, that it is not possible to lay total claim to another person who has retained a strong belief in his or her own self-worth. The island community's stories of Sapphira's independent spirit are recalled by Mama Day:

Bascombe Wade used to have the whole island before he deeded it over to his slaves. Said he fell under the spell of a woman he owned - only in body, not in mind. ...she got away from him and headed over here... on her way back to Africa. And she made that trip - some say in body, others in mind. But the point is that he lost her. (206)

This state of being carries strong echoes of the perspective Frederick Douglass relates in his narrative, asserting that freedom of will is possible prior to the freedom of the body. Having literally fought for his rights, daring to hit back at Mr Covey, the man hired to “break” Douglass, he knows that he has reasserted his autonomy and that “however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact” (Norton
Anthology, Vol 1, 1914). This distinction between form and fact, materiality and mentality, permits a level of endurance grounded in a knowledge of self-authority.

Douglass also describes his transition in terms of a differentiation between slave and man. This is a separation which Samira Kawash focuses on in her discussion of slave narratives as accounts of negotiating property, and therefore colour, boundaries. She is concerned with Douglass’s maintenance, rather than revaluation, of the distinction between the terms slave and man. Douglass states: “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man”. Kawash asks whether these two terms are necessarily mutually exclusive. She queries the absence of commentary about the relation of the slave Douglass was to the man he has become. Sapphira too demands autonomy while her status is still that of a slave. However, rather than addressing that paradox in terms of oppositional definitions Sapphira’s story is introduced as being about “a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words” (3). Sapphira’s assertion of her own will at all times offers evidence of a clear and constant sense of self-possession at odds with the imposed limitations of race or gender. It is important to note that Douglass’s statement about his progression between slave and man casts his understanding of his transition in gender terms that indicate other freedoms. A significant episode on Douglass’s journey towards complete freedom is his marriage to his wife Anna upon arrival on free soil in New York. Kawash points out that as this is the only mention of Anna in the narrative, her function in the text seems to be to indicate the extent of Douglass’s freedom: “marriage marks the self-possession of the man through and in terms of the possession of a wife” (38). His action signifies that liberty is not only related to self-possession but can also be defined in relation to a person’s ability to possess things outside of himself or herself. This potentially excludes slave women from self-possession. The legends surrounding Sapphira Wade offer two retaliatory gestures towards this situation.

Refused the right to own her body Sapphira disregarded the limits of earthly physicality and, so the story goes, took to the skies and flew back to Africa. Sapphira’s flight suggests the fugitive status of the slave on the way to freedom and the layers of meaning in
the story of Sapphira’s flight are wonderfully illuminated by Kawash’s analysis of the fugitive’s act: “In the real, corporeal danger of flight, the enslaved risks the body to regain the body, to rejoin person and property into one subject” (55). The tale also holds such power for future generations because of a woman’s absolute rejection of all outside of herself that lays claim to her. It is also an acknowledgement of the power of a woman who ensured for her children, and their children into eternity, the freedom defined by the right to own property.

The specific details of Sapphira’s story are lost forever, but what is known is that she persuaded Bascombe Wade to deed his land to her descendants. The story of Sapphira and her children can be heard in the whispering voices in the graveyard, like the voice of Cocoa’s great-great-grandfather telling about his uncles: “All them were born in slavery time, but they lived as free men ’cause their mama willed it so” (151). Mary Dearborn’s discussion of the mulatto figure highlights the disturbing significance of disrupted genealogy and the related questions of inheritance:

> The mulatto child, identified according to his mother’s family, deprived of his father’s name, born a slave, was denied his inheritance. The disruption of genealogy the mulatto represents lies at the heart of the complex fictional uses of miscegenation and helps to explain why the mulatto figures so centrally in ethnic women’s fiction.
>
> A primary concern of this fiction is the enormous practical and psychic significance that the denial of the mulatto’s inheritance represents. (136)

The mulatto figure’s insecure material inheritance is seen as reflecting the dual dispossession he or she suffers as an individual whose claim to belong to both the white and black community has frequently excluded him or her from either. Sapphira did find a way to offer her descendants self-possession, insisting they received not only their freedom but also the right to own land, thus making the transition from property to propertied people. The importance of Sapphira’s offspring escaping the problem of disinheritance is indicated by the fact that although no one is able to recall Sapphira’s name “since Sapphira Wade don’t live in the part of our memory we can use to form words” her presence and influence is indicated by reference to 1823, the date Bascombe Wade deeded his land to her offspring(4). The date has
become almost an incantation and a symbol of all that is powerful and beyond full explanation.

So Naylor presents Bascombe Wade not as a slave-owner with complete and brutal power over a slave but as a man whose ultimate loss is that he believes it is possible to possess another person. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has provided eloquent commentary on the possibilities of rethinking the oppressor and oppressed paradigm in slave history:

The pain of that history has decisively complicated the challenge of claiming it as one’s own, insidiously tempting its survivors into a manicheean (sic) vision of good and evil in which innocent victims confront evil oppressors. The manicheean (sic) vision has, since the nineteenth century, been fueled by the abolitionist fervour that condemned slavery as an unmitigated evil. But recognition of the injustice and the crimes of slavery as a social system does not tell us much about the character and humanity of those who participated in it. Even when we allow for the propensity of a social system to shape its participants, we are left with the knowledge that the experience of oppression does not inevitably transform fallible men and women into saints, any more than the exercise of domination inevitably transforms decent men and women into monsters. (793-4)

Mama Day’s realisations recast her ancestors with far more humanity than the victim/victimiser mould permits. Mama Day comes to believe that the ceremony of remembrance that the island community celebrates on Candle Walk Day is not for the first woman who left but for the man who was left behind. The candles light the way for the man wandering in mourning for the woman he couldn’t let go. The realisation is a shock to Mama Day: “Quiet tears started rolling down [her] face. Oh, precious Jesus, the light wasn’t for her - it was for him....How long did he search for her?” (118) The past which Cocoa labours to come to terms with, through her struggle with her body, is a past of loss and sorrow but not of a black woman’s defeat. Cocoa’s struggle with her body, however, indicates that although her material possessions are forever secure her corporeal inheritance is still disturbing. Despite Saphira’s efforts to elude control, to outwit and reject her enslavement, her descendants
carry forever a reminder of the fact that there was an enslavement she had to transcend. Each
new generation in the Day family has faced heartache and loss surrounding the issues of
freedom and possession. From Sapphira Cocoa carries the inheritance of someone whose
body was bought and sold but whose spirit resisted ownership. Sapphira’s legacy needs to be
properly remembered, the lesson of freedom relearnt, the challenge to ownership worked
through once more.

It is the summer that Cocoa finally brings her husband George to the island that the
full weight of her heritage makes itself felt. Bringing with her, her partner, an outsider, sets in
motion a chain of events, responses and personal feelings that force Cocoa into an encounter
with her past. The depth of Cocoa’s anxiety about colour means that the argument with
George, about makeup, becomes a serious one, leaving them both angry and estranged. This
lets Cocoa’s guard down to the pathetic advances of a neighbour, Junior Lee. Although Cocoa
rejects him outright the incident inspires the infamous wrath of Junior Lee’s wife Ruby. Ruby
is a character for whom possessiveness has become a destructive force. She has taken her
claim of others to an extreme of hate and vengeance, to the extent that she has been suspected
of the murder of those who threaten her ownership: her first husband and a girl seen in the
company of her second. The fact of the latter, May Ellen’s, painful death is, Mama Day
thinks, “fact enough to leave anything Ruby says is hers alone” (163). Thinking she is letting
Ruby perform a ritual of reconciliation Cocoa allows Ruby to braid her hair, but Ruby is
practising a revengeful and potentially deadly magic. Naylor’s novel explores different
aspects of and attitudes to conjuring, from Dr Buzzard’s trickery and hoodoo, through Ruby’s
conjuring, which is attuned to negativity and violence, to Mama Day’s genuine knowledge of
the natural world based on observation and intuition. Mama Day has a real awareness of how
people’s minds work; their motivations, fears and desires, and this is the source of her power
for the good. She understands the power of conjuring; that if you can find the individual’s
weakness or strength and influence that, then all kinds of effects can be achieved. Ruby’s
anxiety about ownership connects with Cocoa’s legacy: her conjuring finds the fault line of
Cocoa’s racial anxiety and cleaves it open. The divisions Ruby makes in Cocoa’s hair, while
she braids it, are symbolic of the divisions within Cocoa; white twine woven into brown hair and the hair parted north/south. Massaging poisonous lotion into Cocoa’s scalp and keeping some of her hair, Ruby can make strong magic which enhances Cocoa’s fears.

As the poison begins to take effect, a storm is building, and all the tensions that have been developing converge when the hurricane finally reaches the island. The storm travels from its beginning in Africa, across the Atlantic, via the Caribbean until the full force of it reaches the South, the storm’s journey acting as a powerful metaphor for the slave passage: “It starts on the shores of Africa, a simple breeze among the palms and cassavas, before it’s carried off, tied up with thousands like it, on a strong wave heading due west.... Restless and disturbed, no land in front of it, no land in back, it draws up the ocean vapor and rains fall like tears” (249). The devastating effect of slavery in the South is evoked, but the ultimate survival of the white ruling class is implied: “It hits the southeast corner of the bluff, raising a fist to smash into them high rocks. It screams through Chevy’s pass. ...the oak tree holds. ...the tombstone of Bascombe Wade trembles but holds. The rest is destruction” (250). The storm collides with the island as Cocoa’s body collides with the full import of her past. Part of the reason for this convergence is the way that time functions on the island. The awareness about Willow Springs that permeates the novel is that it is a place suspended in time, where the past is hard to distinguish from the present and the future is inevitably an evocation of the past. George comments that the island “smelled like forever”. The narrator explains “Time don’t crawl and time don’t fly; time is still. You do with it what you want: roll it up, stretch it out, or here we just let it lie” (161). In this way the influence of the past, of slavery times and the presence of previous generations is strong in the present. The turmoil within Cocoa, between her present and her past, her life in the North and her childhood in the South, her slave and slave-holding ancestors, is fought out in her body. Two physical storms are taking place: the wind and the rain that destroys part of the island, and the physical storm in Cocoa’s body that is destroying her from the inside.

As the illness develops Cocoa suffers from extreme weakness and delirium, moving in and out of consciousness. Cocoa’s feverish state is described as though she is underwater.
“everything kept swimming in front of me through this crazy gray light” (259). The images of water in the description of Cocoa’s illness create an association with the drowning of her great grandmother and namesake, Ophelia. Sapphira’s grandson John-Paul married Ophelia whose youngest daughter Peace died when she drowned in a well. Unable to accept the loss of that child, to let go, Ophelia became insane and finally killed herself by drowning in the Sound. The first Ophelia’s act of leaving is in turn twinned with Sapphira’s departure.

Tending the graves in the family plot Cocoa is very aware of the two made noticeable by their absence: “the two graves that are missing?... Sapphira left by wind. Ophelia left by water” (152). Mama Day creates a further connection when she describes Ophelia’s leaving, like Sapphira’s, as a form of flight: “They never found her mama’s body... Mother flew off that bluff screaming Peace” (117). Ophelia’s leaving echoes Sapphira’s mythical return to Africa.

Listening to the whispering voices around the graves, Cocoa hears her own mother’s discussion of Cocoa’s birth name and another tie between Ophelia and Sapphira:

I gave the first and only baby my grandmother’s name. Ophelia. I did it out of vengeance. Let this be another one, I told God, who could break a man’s heart.... If I had known then what I was knowing all along, I woulda named her something else. Sapphira. My grandmother only softly broke a heart. My great-great-grandmother tore one wide open. (151)

These connections down through the generations place Sapphira’s act of rejecting ownership, her move towards self-possession, in a broader context of loss and separation. In her state of delirium Cocoa exists in the same space between possession and self-possession as Sapphira did when she took flight. Again Kawash’s explication of fugitive status is revealing: “in flight, the fugitive is no longer property for another, but neither does he or she become property in him- or herself” (55). In her illness Cocoa is moving between an understanding of parts of herself owned by others, and her body representing past ownership, towards a complete sense of self-possession.

After they arrive in Willow Springs, both George and Cocoa have dreams about drowning which hark back to the first Ophelia’s drowning and to the repeating concern with
possession. They both have dreams in which George is trying to swim across the Sound to reach Cocoa, but he is struggling more and more and losing strength. The more George tries to reach Cocoa, the further away he becomes; the more she calls to him, the greater the distance between them. These dreams enact the pair's anxieties about their ability to reach, to hold onto, to claim, the other. This dynamic of claiming and belonging is at the root of Cocoa's illness.

Cocoa's feelings of conflict, between past and present, are echoed by the different associations with her birth and pet names. Arriving in Willow Springs, Cocoa is aware that George knows only part of her: "The rest of me - the whole of me - was here. And I wondered how you would take the transformation, beginning with something as basic as my name" (176). George has only ever called Cocoa Ophelia but on the island she is only known as Cocoa. This creates for her a sense of two personas which have now coincided. Initially she feels positive about bringing these two selves together: "I was a very fortunate woman, belonging to you and belonging to them. Ophelia and Cocoa could both live in that house with you" (177). As events transpire, however, the pull back to the ways of being and knowing that she learnt during her childhood on Willow Springs are in conflict with her sense of her modern, urban, northern influenced identity. A trip to visit the family graves illustrates the association between Cocoa's childhood and her knowledge of the island. The path to the site is also a path back through time: "The shadows erase the lines on the old brown woman's face and shorten the legs of the young pale one. They near the graveyard within the circle of live oaks and move down into time" (150). This same return to childhood occurs during the feverish stage of Cocoa's illness: "I was a little girl again and it was so nice. My head cradled in Grandma's soft bosom, her hands stroking my forehead..." (261). This regression has greater implications than a return to infantile dependence. As well as reliving the state of being she knew when the island's heritage was ingrained, Cocoa also regresses to a time when the taunts about her colour were harshest and cut deepest, to a time when she learnt the ways that she was different from other darker skinned girls and learnt to mistrust her paleness.

During this stage Cocoa doesn't recognise George. When Mama Day is alerted to the
situation she cuts off Cocoa’s hair and washes the poison from her scalp. Cocoa returns to full consciousness and to her adult self but the damage Ruby intended has been done. Cocoa begins to see strange and troubling reflections of herself that challenge the way she perceives and understands her body.

Looking in the mirror while applying her makeup, Cocoa watches horrified as her face becomes gouged and deformed by the movements of her own hands. Touching her hands to her face she can feel that her skin remains smooth, but this is not what her reflection tells her. It is only what she sees in the mirror that is affected: her eyes looking directly at her body do not see mutilation. It is not Cocoa’s body that is damaged, but her image of it. That night, in the moonlight, Cocoa decides to face whatever it is she sees in the mirror, to confront the mutilation of her body: “Whatever I saw, I saw. And if it was a monster reflected back at me, I was still going to stand there and face it” (281). But what she sees is a distortion of her body in a different way. There are red welts on Cocoa’s skin but the mirror reflects it as perfect, not showing the damage that she knows to exist. Determined to face her difficulties, Cocoa is presented with a perfectly smooth body; a reflection that again denies the physical reality. She is profoundly disturbed by these visual contradictions.

At this juncture it is interesting to read the description in Patricia Williams’ essay ‘On Being the Object of Property’ of her own process of coming to terms with her reflected image. Williams’ essay is her consideration of the ambiguities and complexities of her own racial identity and mixed race ancestry. The disturbing nature of the reflected image that Williams sometimes sees, is testimony to the feelings of anger and resentment she experiences upon trying to negotiate her identity in a world where she feels invisible and lost. She says there are times:

when my skin begins gummy as clay and my nose slides around on my face and my eyes drip down to my chin. I have to close my eyes at such times and remember myself, draw an internal picture that is smooth and whole; when all else fails, I reach for a mirror and stare myself down until the features reassemble themselves.... (166)

For the real Patricia Williams and the fictional Cocoa Day, Susan Gubar’s analysis that for the
mixed race child “the visual is unreliable” is pertinent (209). Not only for others but for themselves the body becomes capricious, disloyal. The essay in which Williams describes these impressions of ‘coming unstuck’, ‘coming apart’ is her attempt to situate her racial self in relation to legal definitions and understandings of property and ownership. With regard to her mixed race identity she feels that the dispossession it recalls demands an attempt to fix that identity within a historical context “as significant, evolved, present in the past, continuing into the future” (156). She feels that such a process is of immense personal and collective importance but comments on the irony inherent in reclaiming the past for someone of mixed race: “Reclaiming that from which one has been disinherited is a good thing. Self-possession in the full sense of that expression is the companion to self-knowledge. Yet claiming for myself a heritage the weft of whose genesis is my own disinheritance is a profoundly troubling paradox” (157). This is precisely the incongruity which Cocoa confronts, which is apparent in the divisions splitting her psyche and manifested in the illness wracking her body.

There is much worse to come for Cocoa before she reaches understanding, because she has internalised so much anxiety. This is graphically depicted by the next horrifying stage of her illness. For Cocoa her body’s instability becomes potentially deadly. The welts which covered Cocoa’s body have now moved into it “pulsing like a living heart before slowly sinking under the surface of [her] skin” (282). They have begun to crawl inside her “spreading so rapidly because they were actually feeding on [her]” (287). The divisive feelings created for Cocoa by her skin colouring have developed into a literal physical conflict within her. Cocoa is so ill that the state of her body is as one which has already died and is rotting away. She gives off a smell of “rotting sweetness” and her flesh is barely warm. George sees that she has “the face of a cadaver”. When her condition continues in this extreme state Cocoa becomes aware of the impact that damage to the body is having emotionally: “There is a limit to how long you can feel your insides being gnawed away without beginning to lose your mind” (290).

Cocoa’s comment draws attention to the exchange between mind and body, but that exchange assumes two separate entities. This distinction between mind and body is a
repeating motif throughout the novel, as has already been discussed in relation to Sapphira’s assertion of her freedom. Cocoa’s illness is also situated in the context of a mind/ body separation. When Cocoa is so disturbed by the mirror images, her grandmother’s reassurance that it was all in her mind was what she “needed desperately to hear” (276). The mind then, for Cocoa, is more manageable than the body. Mama Day tells George that Cocoa is suffering “from something more than the flesh” (294). On these two occasions it is clear that the body is secondary to the mind, an extension or expression of emotion. And yet at other times the body is described as the source of emotions. Cocoa’s connection with the specific heritage of Willow Springs is expressed in terms of physical changes noticeable at the end of one of her summer visits to the island: “Abigail holds a young woman on her front porch who moves different now. It only took a little while for her body to remember how to flow in time with the warm air and the swaying limbs of the oaks. She is deeper in colour and rounder in her face and hips” (51). Cocoa’s memories of the South are accessed through her body. This physical remembering relates to Cocoa’s personal memories of her own lifetime. In another passage references to the beating of drums and the rocking of the slave ships alludes to embodied cultural memories outside of her direct experience.

In the early days of her developing relationship with George, Cocoa described the process by which she dealt with her anxiety and jealousy, the process of playing it cool, as an instinctively physical response, a gut reaction. This extended, vibrant and heartfelt monologue challenges the idea that self-possession requires a separation of mind and spirit:

Now, I’m gonna tell you about cool. It comes with the cultural territory: the beating of the bush drum, the rocking of the slave ship, the rhythm of the hand going from cotton sack to cotton row and back again. It went on to settle into the belly of the blues, the arms of Jackie Robinson, and the head of every ghetto kid who lives to a ripe old age. You can keep it, you can hide it, you can blow it - but even when your ass is in the tightest crack, you must never, ever, LOSE it.

And I didn’t, did I? I dug back to wherever in our history I had to get it, and let it put my body on remote control. I never missed a beat - my steps didn’t falter.
my voice stayed even, I nodded where I should have, stuck in a question now and then, my hands didn’t even sweat - cool. (102)

Here the body’s responses are intrinsically related to cultural expression. Cocoa’s body is seen to carry inherent memories of black cultural history and to be controlled by those memories. She has a reserve of physical control rooted in historical times of need. The resonance and movement associated with patterns of mixed race identity, then where is the acknowledgement of her embodied references to northern European “cultural territory” and what would they comprise? Bascombe Wade’s cultural heritage is referred to specifically as Norwegian. He is an ancestor with cultural reference points of his own but these are not included in Cocoa’s embodied knowledge of her past. Yet if she can access physical memories of the slave passage then why not of the European immigrant passage? The idea that she does not have an embodied memory attached to her European ancestors colludes with the racial construction of whiteness as unbodily as much as if does with the racial construction of blackness as inherently physical. In Net of Jewels Rhoda Manning’s Norwegian ancestors are the source of ideas about whiteness, light and cold determination. It is interesting here then that Cocoa has a slightly different understanding of the process of being “cool”. While she draws on embodied knowledge to achieve the state of being cool it is a state that limits the body so it is on “remote control” and is not responsive. The fact that the text does not construct a sense of European embodiment that parallels the construction of African embodiment demonstrates that even while there is a move towards critically examining mixed race identity, there is still a perception that Cocoa has a discrete racial identity.

The remedy that Mama Day turns to heal Cocoa’s physical dysfunction opens up a further contradiction in the novel’s portrayal of self-possession. Mama Day feels strongly that what will release Cocoa from the clutches of her illness, in the context of her historical legacy, is for George to understand that he does not own or control her. Yet the antidote which the novel here proposes for Cocoa’s near fatal physical anxiety takes a surprising turn. For while strongly emphasising Sapphira’s agency in her relationship with Bascombe Wade it
is to George that Mama Day turns to help Cocoa. While she lies unconscious, her wellbeing rests in George’s hands. George experiences great frustration during Cocoa’s illness that he does not have control of the process or of what happens to her body. This is a pattern of possessiveness that Mama Day feels has been perpetuated in the relationships of the men on the island with the women that they love and that if she can make George understand this then the pattern will be broken.

There are several occasions when George has identified with Bascombe Wade. While visiting Bascombe’s house at ‘the other place’ Cocoa feels that George just wants to “play southern gentleman” with her on his lap (224). Although he senses that the situation was far more complex than that he does feel that the idea of Bascombe sitting on the veranda, while Sapphira snipped sprigs of mint for his tea, was a “nice image” (225). George’s sympathies have cut across racial difference to find what he perceives as common gender ground. This is emphasised again later with his rose-tinted memories of youthful male bonding, recalling: “A wonderful time. Just dozens of boys. Clean fights. Straight talk. Order” (247). This feeling of male community allows him to commiserate with Bascombe’s situation: “Just look at that poor slob buried there - he gave her a whole island, and she still cut out on him” (247). This connection between Bascombe Wade and George Williams underscores another shared perspective: a patriarchal belief in ownership and control. When George is puzzled about the facts of Sapphira’s existence he turns not to Mama Day or Miss Abigail, the two women, he is repeatedly told, who know the island’s secrets, but to the written proof contained in Bascombe Wade’s papers: “Places like this island were ripe for myths, but if she had really existed, there must be some record. Maybe in Bascombe Wade’s papers: deeds of sale for his slaves” (218). Yet George will not find what he really needs to know in the written words of white men, for although they lay claim to Sapphira’s person, she did not recognise that claim.

Mama Day wants George to recognise that misunderstanding. She believes that Bascombe Wade, the white man who could not let go of Sapphira, and John-Paul, the black man who could not let go of Ophelia, were good men struggling with what they believed to be right. She feels strongly that both men believed in what they were doing and suffered intense
and genuine pain at their loss. She understands the origins of Candle Walk as the actions of people coming out to look for Bascombe Wade among the stars: “they figured his spirit had to be there, it was the highest place they knew. And what took him that high was his belief in right...” (308). In order to make George understand the strength of those men’s hopes, but also the mistakes they made, Mama Day wants him to place his hand in hers; a physical connection to link him up with what has gone before. She gives him her father’s walking cane and Bascombe Wade’s ledger, symbols of the two men with whom he needs to connect, and sends him to find what is in the corner of her hen house and bring that back to her. Finding only his hands George rejects the simplicity of Mama Day’s need, the need for connection, and focuses on himself. It seems George cannot relinquish the determination to control but he does not understand the distinction between possession and love so his heart is broken. He decides “these are my hands” and that, like the men before him, he would not let Cocoa go (301). In this way he perpetuates the legacy that Bascombe Wade left, creating loss and sorrow by believing in the power of ownership. Ultimately it is George’s death, the result of a heart attack when exhaustion, anxiety and rejection affect his already weak heart, that breaks the pattern and releases Cocoa from illness.

Cocoa’s transition from one torn apart by emotional strife to someone reconciled to her situation is indicated by her full physical recovery and by the information that she appears as someone who has “been given the meaning of peace” (312). A conventional resolution for the dilemma faced by a confused mixed race woman, the tragic mulatta, is either death or a return to the black community. Lisa Jones is scathing about the imaginative limitations of such a reductive outcome: “the dissatisfying thing, at least on the symbolic tip, about her being ‘returned’ to the black community... is she is stripped of her rebel spirit. She loses her power to rock the racial boat, to question race-based class hierarchy, to expose both the white and black world’s creole underbelly” (52). Cocoa eludes death. Furthermore, she never attempted to separate herself from the black community. What is interesting here is that the community she feels so strongly part of is not a community that excludes the knowledge of its own contradictions. The novel supports a multiplicity of perspectives: “You see, that’s what I
mean - there are just too many sides to the whole story” (311). It is now that she is healed that Cocoa plays her part in understanding her confusing heritage, for she is able to recognise that the past is always with her, but she is also “ready to go in search of answers” (312). What has been opened up for Cocoa by these experiences, the novel insists, is the possibility to move beyond an oppositional perspective on her ancestry towards an appreciation of the complexity of human relationships.

Cocoa painfully grieves George’s death before the healing is complete. This grieving is placed in a wider context of loss and the implications are of the deeply felt losses of slavery: “You’re never free from such a loss. It sits permanently in your middle, but it gets less weighty as time goes on and becomes endurable” (308). Cocoa also views the grieving process as a new beginning: “I thought my world had come to an end. And I wasn’t really wrong - one of my worlds had. But being so young, I didn’t understand that every hour we keep living is building material for a new world, of some sort” (302). This reference to a new world recalls ideas about the formation of African American culture introduced at the beginning of the novel. The bill of sale’s description of Sapphira as “pure African stock” and the information that Bascombe Wade was a Norwegian indicate that the islanders’ origins lie not in America but in African and European cultural identities. As Missy Kubitschek so succinctly puts it, the novel presents “not merely a particular stage or progression of Afro-American culture, but its very creation” (77). The novel suggests that mixed race identity, with all its attendant contradictions, is an inherent part of African American culture and that refusal to acknowledge that situation is ultimately damaging. For Cocoa to see herself clearly, to see “what she is” means facing the contradiction that “the biracial infant holds, namely the lie commingled blood lines put to historical accounts of a segregated culture” (Gubar 207). Through its construction of Cocoa’s physicality the novel offers new ways of imagining the permutations of mixed race identity. For as Gloria Naylor so effectively describes the black community: “We are a people of color, and if you took a family portrait, we would just be gorgeous. And we would range.” (Red Clay 163) Mama Day feels that what is to be learnt from George and Cocoa’s experience is not to create another text to be used prescriptively: “it
ain't about chalking up 1985, jotting it down in a ledger to be tallied with the times before and
the times after” (305). Rather the issue seems to be to persevere with a process of perceiving
and accepting ambiguity and ambivalence.
Concluding Comments: Unreliable Bodies

The readings offered in this thesis demonstrate how much meaning can be invested in bodies as locations of personal and social expression. In these texts the residual effect of the institution of slavery is expressed in various ways through representations of bodily identity and health. In all the novels examined, constructions of bodies are crucial in negotiating the characters’ sense of identity in relation to racial assumptions attributed to slave ideology. Bodies function as sites of cultural interpretation and mediation. Reading constructions of women’s bodies reveals much about the ways in which they are situated on either side of a race divide which intersects with gender hierarchy; how certain associations are made with specific bodily features, and how intercorporeal communication is understood. Readings of corporeality in these novels disclose the extent to which assumptions about race, sexuality, beauty, power and hierarchy, connected with beliefs about slave practice and ideology, remain embedded in attitudes to embodiment.

These texts all reference slavery and demonstrate a concern with its continuing influence. They all, directly or indirectly, acknowledge slavery as the origin of the power dynamic, social organisation and cultural attitudes which inform the women’s daily lives. In all these texts constructions of bodies add further layers of meaning to the characters’ meditations on their own sense of themselves, on their interaction with others and on their place in history. All have different approaches to embodiment and notions of embodied memory, which relate to their assumptions about racial difference and hierarchy. What can be understood from all these readings is that full engagement with corporeality, while creating awareness of many issues, does little to resolve problematic attitudes and much to increase a sense of confusion and complexity. Understanding bodies as sites of knowledge at any level does not then allow easy conclusions or certainty. Focusing on corporeal expressions of anxiety permits a clearer understanding of problems, but the outcome is often that bodies cannot be resecured to a fixed position: ideas of racial uncertainty must be accommodated.
In all these novels the construction of physicality functions as an expression of distress or even emergency. The central characters reach crises of identity related to their racial situation and the "past's persistence in the present". These crises may be precipitated or extended by awareness of a bodily condition or dysfunction, while subsequent attention to corporeal changes can contribute to overcoming the dilemmas. However, this is never achieved by reinstalling an idea of the body as a fixed or stable site of identity. Often, the characters' responses are an assertion of a desire to maintain a status quo of stable racial categories. Yet the processes of bodily unease and change that they experience enable a confrontation with ambiguity and shifting parameters in their lives. The more able the characters are to accept the falsity of fixed corporeal definition, the more able they are to move towards a functioning life and balanced self-definition.

All four novels achieve different levels of success in disturbing notions of racial purity and clarity. Rhoda Manning is perhaps the least successful at relinquishing notions of rigid racial markers, even while she claims to adopt an open-minded perspective. Despite the anguish caused by the strictures she imposes on her body, she remains entangled in a set of assumptions about bodies, which she understands as harking back to Southern patriarchal race codes. Unable to let go of the concept of whiteness as a fixed universal given, she cannot release the behaviour patterns needed to maintain the illusion of perfect, transcendent whiteness. She flies home asleep in her father's arms, passive and acquiescing to his domineering racist perspective.

Avey Johnson flies home with much more self-awareness and social vision. Having suffered the severe emotional and physical disturbances of her journey, she has come to accept the multifarious cultural origins of black identity, and their continuing metamorphosis. Yet Avey cannot completely release the conception of black identity as embodied: as rooted entirely in the body, rather than as an unceasing exchange between body and culture. This reluctance leaves a residual anxiety and contradiction in the novel's account of bodily existence. Ellen Douglas's text, too, does not always go beyond fixed corporeal associations, even when the body is a site of extreme anxiety. The novel does disturb, on several levels of
embodied voices and body language, notions of racial difference and hierarchy. It does
unflinchingly confront the antagonism and ambivalence that exist in a practical inter-racial
dynamic and the ways this attitude is maintained by assumptions of physical difference and
associated meanings.

Naylor's novel in many ways does the most to destabilise fixed ideas of physicality,
identity and attached value judgements. Cocoa is the character in whom the boundary
between definitions of black and white is most obviously blurred and indistinct. Her cultural
reference points are clearly located within a black community. Attempting to have a body
which to her justifies a place in that community creates a problem, because her body does not
correspond with the type of colour or features she believes are necessary. Cocoa's pale
buttermilk, golden, light-reflecting, "18 and 23 black", "no ass and no color" body does not
exist in any physical place that she understands as undeniably black. When this is understood
as a negative situation, to be overcome, it ceases to be so damaging. It is attempts to fix
bodies in place which are futile. When Cocoa understands and accepts her physicality as a site
of contradictions, reflecting a dynamic and changing heritage, then she ceases to perceive it as
a source of shame.

The most productive place to read these fictional bodies from, then, is at the
boundaries of corporeal categorisation, with a recognition that, as there is no way of fixing
those boundaries in place, the confusion of blurred edges extends across all apparent race
certainty. At any moment the ambiguity of border crossing and racechange can come into
play. Even well within what is thought to be secure racially specific territory, revealing
moments of uncertainty create tremors in the groundwork of social assumptions about racial
bodies. In all the novels, moments of racechange and boundary confusion illuminate the
arbitrary nature of what has been set in place. Instances such as Avey's view of a white mask
over her husband's face, as well as her failure to recognise a reflection of a black woman as
herself; Rhoda's desire to identify with Klane's embodied tribal spirit; the description of
Mayberry as golden; the acknowledgements of Tweet's blue eyes and pink scar and the
ambiguity about Cocoa's name, colour and heritage represent shifts in identification and
desire between black and white. Such moments reverberate out through the texts creating slippages that destabilise ideas about raced bodies.

Once bodies have been acknowledged as shifting and responsive sites of expression, and once they have been released from fixed defining parameters, forcing them back into compliance with notions of unchangeable identity is a difficult and redundant exercise. Once Avey's body has erupted and convulsed with its rejection of her limiting concept of self there is no denying the importance of her corporeality in her personal crisis. Her attempts to incorporate ideas about her body as a place of specific cultural knowledge, with her belief in rejecting the body as limiting, continue to create her body as a site of contention. The extent to which Rhoda does have to attack, manipulate and deny her body is an overwhelming indication of the measures required to keep a body within its confines of racial purity. Tweet and Cornelia's bodily responses are expressions of the artificial constraints placed on individuals by concepts of difference. The arbitrary constructions of otherness are disrupted by the women's physical disability and pain. Yet once they have managed to hear each other's embodied voices, there is no clear reconciliation but only a confrontation with ambivalence which they must continue to negotiate. For Cocoa, such false notions of difference collide within her. Her corporeal identity completely undermines any attempts to construct a discrete racial identity.

I want to conclude this examination of the productive unreliability of racial embodiment by offering a brief reading of two texts from a slightly different perspective: reading them for the suggestive denial of bodies. Looking at one novel written prior to the core texts, Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975), and one written more recently, Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998), provides an interesting context for the concluding remarks on these novels. These texts construct conspicuously invisible or unresponsive bodies as a commentary on the unreliability of bodies as sites of knowledge and memory relating to slavery.

These two texts are introduced here in order that this conclusion functions not only to sum up arguments but to suggest ways of moving them forwards. Bodies are constructed in these novels as sites of anxiety so that corporeality is rejected or denied as a contributor to
identity. What will be briefly examined here is the possibility that even when bodies are negated, this rejection is an indicator of their significance and the important meanings attached to them. The intention here is that this short concluding discussion does not so much close down the arguments so far put forward, but offers potentially new perspectives that leave productive opportunities for further thought.

In Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* the central character, Ursa, has been led to rely fundamentally on her body as a means of coming to terms with the past, and moving her heritage into the future, by the making of generations. This grandchild and great-grandchild of slave women sexually abused and tortured by their owner, has been taught to understand that giving birth to a daughter, and passing the stories on to her, is the best way to deal with the family's legacy. Yet in the late 1940s, four generations later, Ursa is having difficulty fulfilling this legacy. On the Spanish colonial plantations where the women were kept, all papers referring to slavery were burnt after emancipation. After slavery ended, the women moved to the Southern states. Ursa's grandmother and great-grandmother were therefore adamant that the stories of their abuse and violation should be told over and over again until they were seared into the memory and became unforgettable. They believe it is the power of words told repeatedly that enables memory. It is not suggested so much that bodies carry memories, although there are moments intimating inherent bodily knowledge, but rather that bodies are crucial for the making of generations to pass the stories and memories down to.

Ursa's understanding of her maternal ancestors' desires has become almost an incantation:

My great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmama didn't live through and my grandmama told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget.

(9)

Ursa has also been taught since childhood of her role as creator of descendants: "What my mama always told me is Ursa, you got to make generations. Something I've always grown up
with" (10). However, Ursa’s body has been damaged so that she can no longer have children. After a fall downstairs, as result of her possessive husband’s violence, Ursa has had a hysterectomy. She has been distraught and grieving about this devastating loss and feels its wider implications: "as if something more than the womb had been taken out" (6). She feels its reverberations across her life: "As if part of my life’s already marked out for me - the barren part” (6). So Ursa’s body now lacks the ability to contribute to her family’s ongoing challenge to having their lives violated and denied. She is no longer able to fulfil their expectations of her. Her body is a place of loss and Ursa is conscious of “the space between my thighs. A well that never bleeds” (99). Her body has become unreliable and faulty as a site through which new generations and memories can pass. Ursa wonders whether, even if she had had a child, she would have persisted with the telling of stories; whether she would have been like the women before or whether she would have broken the chain. In a dream symbolic of her anxiety she gives birth to Corregidora, the Portuguese slave owner who abused her grandmothers. This suggests that for Ursa to give birth at all would not be to assert her control over a heritage of slave abuses, but to reproduce, for another generation, the pain and anguish of that legacy. Ursa imagines other ways of moving forwards, not intrinsically tied to bodies and procreation.

Throughout her life Ursa had had doubts about the demands made upon her, as well as feelings that her family did not understand or accept her own way of passing on her memories through singing the blues. She shows signs of resentment and anger that her grandparents’ memories of the past subsume her mother’s life and her own life. In an imagined monologue with her husband she explains: “I never told you how it was. Always their memories, but never my own” (100). She is unhappily aware that she has never heard stories of her mother’s life, or of her own father or her birth. Ursa has watched the painful determination with which her mother has passed on her own mother’s and grandmother’s stories, according to their wishes, while holding back her own:

And still it was as if my mother’s whole body shook with that first birth and memories and she wouldn’t make others and she wouldn’t give those to me, though
she passed the other ones down, the monstrous ones, but she wouldn’t give me her own terrible ones.... Still she carried their evidence, screaming, fury in her eyes, but she wouldn’t give me that, not that one. Not her private memory. (101)

Ursa feels that it is time to move into the present, to uncover the story of her origins and to reassess her life. She begins to wonder at the value and purpose of an entirely remembered life rather than one lived in the present, questioning: “What’s a life always spoken, and only spoken?” (103).

Ursa has always been conscious that she is the first generation of the women since her great grandmama who is not Corregidora’s daughter. Such was his violation and abuse that he fathered a daughter by his own daughter. Ursa feels that she has been able to break free from this cycle, telling herself, perhaps insistently, perhaps triumphantly: “But look at me, though, I am not Corregidora’s daughter. Look at me, I am not Corregidora’s daughter” (103). Even as a child she had told her mother defiantly that she “wasn’t no Corregidora” (147). Although she feels partly linked to her family through the stories they have relentlessly told her she also feels partly divorced from them, with her own separate strand of identity. Seeing a photograph of herself, and so seeing her physical appearance from a new perspective, reveals more of this attitude. Ursa had always thought of herself as different: “Their daughter, but somehow different. Maybe less Corregidora” (60). This difference has to do with appearance and associated racial identity. Ursa seems to have thought of herself as somehow less obviously affected by racial mixing. When she sees the photograph however she realises that her ancestry is evident: “when I saw that picture, I knew I had it. What my mother and my mother’s mother before her had. The mulatto women. Great Gram was the coffee-bean woman, but the rest of us...” (60). With painful irony, as Ursa recalls this revelation of connection she also realises that, after her hysterectomy, she is now physically different from the other women and that she can forge a separate identity released from the past. She comes to feel the urge to make her “own kind of life” (111).

There are other ways, related to her physicality, in which she feels a sense of her separate self. Ursa’s mother often expresses her experiences through her physicality. It seems
to Ursa that, when telling the passed down stories of slavery, her mother takes on the physical persona and the voice of the original teller. She also talks about her mother’s body shaking with the fury of giving birth to Ursa while holding back her own memories. Her mother talks of having prior bodily knowledge of the birth and its outcome: “...it was like it knew it wanted you. It was like my whole body knew it wanted you, and knew it would have you, and knew you'd be a girl.... It was like my whole body knew” (114). Ursa's mother clearly believes in an intuitive corporeality.

In comparison, there are times when Ursa seems disconnected and distanced from her body. There are two instances she records from her childhood when a boy, on one occasion, and on another occasion, a man, make sexual advances towards her, but Ursa is completely unaware of what they are doing until her mother pulls her away. Yet there are other times when she does express her physicality in relation to her history. She says what she does as an expression of resentment about the extent to which the past has encroached on her life: “we’re all consequences of something. Stained with another’s past as well as our own. Their past in my blood” (45). She also describes her body as an expression of the past even while she denies aspects of that past: “You asked me how did I get to be so beautiful. It wasn’t him. No, not Corregidora. And my spirit, you said, like knives dancing. My veins are centuries meeting” (46). Ursa is not comfortable with her body as the expression of her family heritage, wanting instead to express herself through the blues. Ursa does express her whole commitment to the music by saying, in another imaginary dialogue with her husband: “I sang to you out of my whole body” (46). However, such body language remains a rejection of the role prescribed for her body by her ancestors. Ursa's way of expressing herself through song is different from what her family have requested for her and they are resistant to it: “Yes, if you understood me, Mama, you'd see I was trying to explain it, in blues, without words, the explanation somewhere behind the words. To explain what will always be there” (66). She asks them: “let me give witness, the only way I can” (54). Ursa feels that the only way she can respond and “give witness” to her past is through the songs she sings about it.

Thinking of her desire to express herself through song; “a song that would touch my
life and theirs" she ruminates on the confusion of their lives, on the confusion of the father having sex with his daughter, on the confusion of the Portuguese man, the black woman and the mulatto child. She mourns the “suppressed hysteria” required for their survival and the sacrificed lives of women defined only by their skin colour and their genitals. She wonders how they identified, and how they knew, their own bodies: “And you, Grandmama, the first mulatto daughter, when did you begin to feel yourself in your nostrils? And, Mama, when did you smell your body with your hands?” (59) Confusion and anxiety about their right to own or know their bodies is expressed by this muddling of senses. Ursa's songs are considerations of bodies; productive, damaged, violated and reproductive, which enable her to move beyond defining herself purely in terms of her own physicality.

In Paradise the concern with unreliable bodies is communicated by a reluctance to acknowledge corporeality. On the occasions when this situation is noted and the attitudes to bodily identity are articulated, the reason for the reticence becomes apparent: the importance of possessing a certain type of body runs so deep that it has become a kind of taboo. From the opening sentence of Morrison's novel, questions of racial identity pervade the text, yet they are exacerbated by the lack of clarification which follows. After the initial statement: “they shoot the white girl first” the reader's awareness of race issues is frustrated by a lack of explanation about who is or isn't black or white. This opening sentence draws attention to the white girl's difference; to her whiteness in relation to invisible others and to her isolation as the white girl. Yet after such attention is drawn to colour there are only fleeting further references to it, until the only open discussion of racial identity over halfway into the novel. It is apparent though that this community of women has broken the social and racial codes of the neighbouring all black town. The uncertainty instigated by reference to a nameless white girl, introduces the sense of tension that situation creates.

Paradise expresses anxieties rooted in slavery and the cost of an obsession with the past. There is such concern with preserving heritage and memories of past resistance that it completely overshadows the present. In the late sixties and early seventies, in the insular community of Ruby, Oklahoma, population three hundred and sixty, attitudes have become
defined by prejudice in response to past rejection. The town leaders have incorporated ideas of racial purity previously used against them, into their own philosophy. *Paradise* approaches the entrenched concern with racial purity that is a legacy of slavery. Among those who wield authority, like the Morgan, Fleetwood and Poole families, there is serious underlying anxiety about maintaining absolute blackness. Anyone but those with the darkest skin is perceived as a threat, even an enemy.

This perspective is at the root of attempts to control women and to ensure their containment. The assumption runs that if men can control women and their bodies they can control reproduction and therefore race purity. The women at the convent, outside of male jurisdiction, are perceived as sexually deviant, and said to be running a brothel. They are blamed for the failed reproduction of other women: for Sweetie’s deformed babies. This then is the cause of the terror which leads the men to confront the women in the convent, and to do so armed with guns.

For most of the first half of the novel bodies are an absent presence in the text. Fleeting references to skin colour, hair and eyes draw attention to the unease concerning physicality. It does become clear that the town at the edge of which the eclectic group of women are housed, is a defiantly all-black community. However, the unwritten rules of physical appearance and membership in the group are never enunciated. It is only through Patricia Best's cynical commentary that the background to the rules, and the silence surrounding them, are revealed. What is already clear is that whiteness is threatening and associated with decay and contamination. The men who went to the convent on their violent mission were determined that “nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain” (5). Yet this assertion reveals cracks in the unity they claim to be protecting. The account of the town's creation is one of exclusion across the board; by Choctaw, poor whites and wealthy blacks. Since then pride has decreed separation from all those who are not as black as them. The “all-black town” speaks of racial purity, but if they shot the white girl first then are the others black and if so then why are they still a threat? Furthermore, if the convent is outside the town then what is it inside the town that is threatening?
As the story of the town's past, which daily and consciously influences its present, is sketched out, a story of betrayals, hardship and loss is exposed. Patricia Best is painfully aware of how the community's silences regarding bodies are influenced by the original group's experiences while trying to create the town. In the genealogical records of the town, which she obsessively updates, she uses a small symbol to denote what she understands as a crucial factor in the town's racial awareness: "each and every one of the intact nine families, had the little mark she had chosen to put after their names: 8-R. An abbreviation for eight-rock, a deep deep level in the coal mines" (193). For those who understand themselves to be pure black, it is, within the town, a distinguished mark of superiority: "Blue-black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren't 8-rock like them" (193). Their pride in their visible blackness is something they have determinedly claimed in the face of oppressive rejection. During the process of their forefathers' migrations, and then their own, it became slowly apparent that they were literally marked out as different: "The sign of racial purity they had taken for granted had become a stain" (194). The novel offers an account of the way all their confrontations have been focused around their consciousness of colour, until it is colour alone that stands out as the signifier of difference between them and all others. Injustices and power imbalances instigated during slavery, and maintained after it, have boiled down to a reminder carried by bodily markings: "for ten generations they had believed the division they fought to close was free against slave and rich against poor. Usually, but not always, white against black. Now they saw a new separation: light skinned against black" (194). Their response is to invert the hostility and hold absolute blackness up as the example of purity and perfection.

In the first half of the novel there are only glimpses of the importance of corporeality in the town's collective sense of identity. Anna Flood comments that when she did not straighten her hair but grew an Afro: "Like a Geiger counter, her hair registered, she believed, tranquillity or the intensity of a rumbling, deep-down disorder" (119). Here social responses, especially to a politically significant body image, are registered through that body. Rumblings of disorder are what the town leaders wish to avoid, but clearly certain forms of embodiment
are a trigger for that disorder. The account provided by Mavis, the first woman to arrive at the convent is also revealing. She does not see a single white person in the town of Ruby, but when she is taken to meet the Mother Superior, the last remaining nun at the convent, she sees that “the whiteness at the center was blinding”. It is not until later that it is revealed that the whiteness at the centre of Ruby is also blinding, or rather that the community attempts to be blind to it.

With regard to racial purity the town's name is harshly ironic, for it evokes ruby red blood and hence associations with both racial specificity carried in blood and racial equality signified by the same blood colour in everyone. Yet the community's fear is that its internal strength will be lost through impurity either by “scattering” of the group or by intrusion from light-skinned outsiders. Those who do not fulfil the corporeal requirements are silently but steadfastly rejected, resulting in intense grief and even death. Yet despite the pervasive influence of this decision it is unwritten and unspoken: “So the rule was set and lived a quietly throbbing life because it was never spoken of...” (195). This attitude throbs through the consciousness of the town's inhabitants affecting their knowledge of their bodies without being vocalised.

The dangerous consequences of these repressed attitudes are only fully intuited by a woman, Lone Dupres, who, like Pat Best, holds herself separate and apart from the community, even while she lives within it. A midwife and healer with powerful insight into people's ways of thinking, Lone recognises the danger signs when the male leaders of the community begin to focus their frustrations with other townsfolk on the women in the convent. Overhearing their emotionally heated debate prior to their attack on the convent she hears the meaning behind the words and recognises the greed and prejudice that motivates much of it. However, the narrative ascertains that she could not have known of the deep level of racial intolerance in the minds of two pivotal community figures, Deacon and Steward Morgan. Years previously Deacon had had an affair with Consolata, a South American woman brought to the convent as a child. The relationship with this golden-skinned woman had in Steward's eyes “narrowly escaped treason against the fathers' law, the law of
continuance and multiplication" (279). Steward has maintained his disgust and bitterness towards Connie, as well as towards the other women living there, who he regards as a "flaunting parody" of all he thinks "Negro ladies" should be (279). Deacon still feels shame for his actions and wants to erase not only the shame but "the kind of woman he believed was its source" (279). After the men's traumatic and destructive trip to the convent Pat Best states the three main motivations she understands for their actions: "(a) because the women were impure (not 8-rock); (b) because the women were unholy...; and (c) because they could - which was what being 8-rock meant to them..." (297). The men's behaviour is instigated by fear of crossed racial boundaries and a desire to reassert gender authority.

One of the things which horrifies the men most when they are at the convent, for they project their own fear onto it, is the set of drawings the women have made of themselves on the cellar floor. The women had started to come to terms with the difficulties in their lives through representations of their bodies. Having sketched life-size silhouettes of themselves they then transfer their ideas about their lives and bodies onto these images. For the men, who live in a community which does not explicitly acknowledge corporeality, the murals are perverse and shocking in the extreme. Their anger and their fear of difference leads to death and destruction. Their actions in attacking the women and killing two, or possibly all, of them are met with condemnation from some of the community. The personal viewpoint of Reverend Misner is that their actions perpetuate hostilities they aimed to overcome: "They think they have outfoxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him" (306). Yet after the attack has ended and people leave the convent, it appears that something disturbing happens to the women's bodies. When the undertaker returns he cannot find any bodies, dead or alive. The women have left to continue their lives away from Ruby, but to the town it seems that the women's bodies have simply disappeared. In this way they return once more to a situation of negated bodies. The men's aims have been achieved in that, for them, the dangerous bodies have been removed.

In the two novels that have been briefly examined here, bodies are not regarded as productive sites of knowledge or expression. Corporeality is an aspect of the self which is
unreliable and even potentially dangerous. Bodies are rejected or completely denied. Yet investigating the silence that surrounds these bodies is still a productive route to understanding attitudes to identity related to slavery's racial legacy. The reasons that bodies are mistrusted and therefore denied is in itself expressive of the weight of meaning that is attached to them and the importance of having what is perceived to be racially correct physicality.

In all the texts discussed in this thesis bodies are confronted or denied as part of a connection with the past. The encounter with history is expressed through corporeality. Bodies are represented as both a limitation on personal freedom and a device by which restrictions can be overcome. These fictions express the need to negotiate, through an individual's corporeality, in order to let go of the influence of the past or to make it useful in the present. In all the core fictions bodies carry meaning. In some cases this is a literal belief that bodies are in themselves a source of memory and cultural knowledge. In other cases bodies are constructed as representative of different meanings to different people. Reading corporeality in all of these contemporary texts reveals ways in which those constructions of physicality can be barometers of ideas and beliefs about race, power, and slavery's enduring conceptual influence.
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