Willa and Dana, Livin the Blues: The Psychohistorical Journey toward Femheraic Self-Identity

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For a long, long time, we been livin' the blues
For a long long time, we been payin' dues;
We been up and we been down almost level to the ground;
For a long, long, time we been livin' the blues!
Living the blues has made us strong! (Sounds of Blackness)

Introduction

Livin' the blues made Willa and Dana strong! Through them, for the African American female voice, Gloria Naylor and Octavia Butler are singing the blues. The Sounds of Blackness are tellin' it like it is, and like it was, in their soundtrack *Africa to America, the Journey of the Drum*. Naylor and Butler in their novels, *Linden Hills* and *Kindred* are also tellin' it like it is! African Americans have had a journey and are still on a journey. In recognition of who they truly are, they must acknowledge and sing their own blues; they must put forward and write, as well as tell, their own history stories: "Stand up and talk about me,/And write about me . . . . I reckon it'll be/ Me myself!" (Hughes 1940). Following that advice from Langston Hughes, their literary godfather, Naylor and Butler have done just that.

In the explication of the female self, the African American woman writer must explore the hard times that her kin and kind have lived through and are still encountering in their 20th century and 21st century postmodernism. As a novelist or poet, as a story-teller or song-writer, she explores the blues, the melancholy and dejection that her people have endured yet triumphed over. To bring it forward to her people as well as to a wider audience, she must reinterpret the traditions she reads and out of which she writes; then, as Barbara Christian notes, she reinvents her role "in the midst of patriarchal discourse as to who she is supposed to be" (1985 ix). Ultimately, she must reinterpret and reinvent the Western molds and transfigure them into African American means. These are tasks the African American female writers Gloria Naylor[i] and Octavia Butler[ii] have taken on "masterfully" when they adopt and then adapt the patriarchal journey motif to the psychohistorical journey of the African American female toward her self-identity.

1.0: Self- Identity in Womanist Theory

Without giving up their innate selves, Naylor, in ***Linden Hills*** (1985), and Butler, in ***Kindred*** (1979)[iii] transcend time and place and transform the female personas into, what Alice Walker refers to in ***Temple of My Familiar*** (1989) as, the "womanist" version of the hero. This theoretical perspective puts women of color not only in gender differences but in social situations that are peculiar to them and especially trying. Situations that they must confront as no other woman must. Womanist theory emerged in 1983 with Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* and by the 1990s had become firmly established as a system to study the triangulated oppressions imposed on black women.

Carol Marsh-Lockett defines *womanism* as a discourse designed to address the "triple impact of sex, race, and class on African American women and to compensate for the traditional shortcomings of feminist and African American liberation discourse that have routinely excluded the peculiar needs of African American women" (Andrews, Foster, and Harris 785). Womanist perspectives situate the political, socio-cultural, and historical depressions based upon the intersectionality of race, class, and gender on black women and their bodies (Blasingame 18). Naylor and Butler take on that postmodern perspective while repositioning the traditional milieu to place the African American female at the center and the core, and in the lead, to address and embattle their situation, to become stronger while livin' their blues.

1.2: Femhera Development in Self Discovery. For Naylor and Butler, the female protagonist transforms away from being the traditional heroine, for she learns not to rely on the male counterpart to rescue or define her. Nor is she "hero," for she does not pretend to adopt male characteristics to perform "mannish" tasks. The female protagonist that Naylor and Butler put forward in their journey toward self-identity produces a new coinage: a blend of "female" and "hero" and "heritage" with the feminine marker "-a" becoming fem- + her-+ -a: the **femhera** {pronounced *fem-aír-a*} The femhera risks annihilation to save the future of her kin and kind, yet neglects not her woman-ness nor her female sensibilities. Gloria Naylor has said that when she writes it is to help the reader as it helps herself to "look into the psyche of Black women." Her works examine "being black, and a woman, and surviving in a time between yesterday and tomorrow."[iv] Octavia Butler, as well, looks into surviving in the yesterday and the tomorrow by addressing them in the now; her works, "unbounded by time or space," examine the responsibility of the powerful to the powerless. She writes of women who are "as strong in [their] feminine, maternal power as [the male] is in his masculine aggressiveness" (O'Connor, 33).

1.3: The Femheraic psychogenic experience. It is phenomenally appropriate that the vehicle for the display of masculine ability, the journey motif, a strong structural device as well as a thematic one, was deliberately chosen by Naylor for ***Linden Hills*** and by Butler for ***Kindred.*** Their femheras, Willa and Dana, both have a psychogenic experience, for they endure both mental and emotional conflict while encountering physically an historical reality that at first was seen as only originating, therefore manageable, in their minds. In both works, 'it's a journey of discovery . . . filled with alienated, hypocritical, lonely, sometimes psychotic people"(Campbell). In ***Linden Hills***, Willa journeys back over 150 years of history, reviewing the life of each of her motherly ancestors from 1830s chattel slavery to 1980s contemporary servitude. In ***Kindred***, Dana also journeys back over 150 years; she views the lives of her ancestral mothers from the 1820s to the 1830s for their influence on her life in the 1970s. It is through these parallel experiences of Willa and Dana that Naylor and Butler have transfigured the western heroic journey motif into an African American female paradigm.

2.0: The Femheraic Adaptation of the Traditional Journey

The journey motif, which Naylor and Butler have transformed, is a familiar one in Western literature. Some of the most well-known ones include the works of Bill Bryson— *African Diary* and *Notes from a Small Island*; Gerald Durrel - *A Zoo in My Luggage; My Family And Other Animals*; Alexandre Dumas **--***Caucasus***;** Rafael Sabatini **-** *Captain Blood: His Odyssey;* Robert Louis Stevenson - *Treasure Island***;** and Jules Verne **-** *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea***.** The journey has persisted as one of the most common features of narrative and dramatic literature. It is, essentially, any course or passage from one stage or experience to another. That journey may be a physical or psychological quest in search or pursuit of adventure; the adventure may be actual, spiritual, or emotional. This quest, as defined by Fryer, Baker and Perkins, involves an individual who embarks upon the journey, the hero; that is usually a male of superhuman ability, and a leader with superior physical or moral strength (Quest, 1985).

2.1 The Western Journey motif. The components and structure of the journey motif have been identified as characteristic of folk tale and myth as used by the early critical narratologists, such as Claude Levi-Strauss and Vladimir Propp, the mythologist Joseph Campbell (1949), and the myth critic Northrop Frye. Although their critical perspectives have been reviewed, revised, and updated, the early studies of Campbell and Propp realize the persistently similar structures and arrangements for the components of the journey motif in a three-part analysis:

1. The Departure or Separation of the Hero;
2. The Initiation which includes the Trials, Tests, and Victories of the Hero;
3. The Return from the outer world or Reintegration with society where the Hero settles that which prompted the departure.

The journeys of our femheras, Willa and Dana, incorporate the structure that Campbell outlines. First, Willa is separated by her husband into isolation down in their basement, and Dana is compelled to depart from her home in California to that of her ancestors in antebellum Maryland. Then, Willa is initiated into her trials and tests with the death of her son who is not accepted by his father, and Dana's tests begin when she must witness the inhumane treatment of her maternal ancestors while being obligated to save the life of the one causing it. And, ultimately, in the last stage of the journey, Willa, coming up from the basement, returns from her isolation and settles with her husband, and Dana settles with the one requiring her help and returns to her home-place. The patterned journeys of Willa and Dana do as Campbell and the narrative tradition suggest, and yet they do more:

As Dana's narrative unfolds, the text seeks to negotiate how her sense of self can be reconciled to the competing yet related historical constructions of 'race', gender, and sexuality that inform black femininity in both the 19th and the 20th centuries and, indeed, whether or not she is able to transcend these often- limiting paradigms.(Wood: 86)

This estimation of Butler's story for Dana, as stated by Sarah Wood in "Exorcizing the Past", equates phenomenally to Naylor's Willa. For both are dealing with their sense of self in their psychohistorical journey through their cultural heritage in America in a manner that goes beyond the typical portrayal of the Black female as docile victim. By incorporating not only the feminist but the womanist perspective for the African American female, Naylor and Butler go beyond the traditional portrayal of the journey, as purported in the often disputed and critically negated works of Campbell. While Campbell addresses the familiarity of the journey motif in myth, Vladimir Propp presents the basic structure of the journey in folk tales. Essentially coinciding with Campbell's three stages of the journey, Propp's seven (7) spheres of action and thirty-one (31) fixed elements or "functions" fit into a three-part analysis which describes the established Western tradition.

2.2. African American Journey Motif. However, this established Western analysis of the journey is re-configured for the African American narrative. Just as African American narratologists cannot avoid their Western heritage, neither can they ignore their African sensibility: an inherent inclination toward the proverbial, mystical, and the metaphysical, in time, place, and persona (Thompson). This inclination is not an oddly remarkable phenomenon. On the contrary, according to Henry Louis Gates (1988, ***Signifying Monkey***), its failure to occur would have been extraordinary:

> The African . . . was a traveler . . . through space and time . . . [and] 'read' a new environment within a received framework of meaning and belief . . . . African slavery in the New World satisfied the preconditions for emergence of a new African culture, a truly Pan-African culture fashioned as a colorful weave of linguistic, institutional, metaphysical, and formal threads . . . .

Afro-American culture is an African culture with a difference as signified by the catalysts of [European] languages and cultures, which informed the precise structures that each discrete New World Pan-African culture assumed.[v]

Together the Western European and the African heritages have informed an African American literary tradition that reinvigorates the journey motif. In addition to the basic Western heroic journey paradigm, as codified by Campbell and Propp, the formula is also comprised of three individually articulated, but interdependent, units that Claude Levi-Strauss calls '**mythemes**." Levi-Strauss explains his terminology with this analogy: mythemes are "like the basic units of language (phonemes) because they acquire meaning only when combined together in particular ways." While Levi-Strauss's term is quote appropriate semantically, his analogy with phonemes is not. For, he says that mythemes are meaningless, when they are, in fact, quite meaningful as used in this explication of the African American experience. Mythemes have meaning within themselves, as morphemes—the smallest *meaningful* units in a language—and they articulate meanings greater than their individual selves when combined with other mythemes.

3.0: The Psychohistorical Journey

The mythemes as used by Naylor and Butler reconstruct the departure-adventure-return cycles of the journey motif through the mythemes of TIME, PLACE, and PERSONA. In the classical Western narrative, TIME is universal, a remote 'once upon a', while in the African American narrative, TIME is an historical, a definite, not so remote, past which affects the present. In the Western mythic narrative, PLACE is an unspecified 'other' locale' outside of our realm of a defined everyday reality. But in the African-American, PLACE is America with shades of Africa; an America that defies an expected reality, an Africa that is withheld from and outside of our sense of a defined reality. In the classical Western narrative, PERSONA is active, heroic, male. In Gloria Naylor and Octavia Butler's African American journey, PERSONA is introspective, Black, heroic, and female. Taken individually and applied to any other text, these mythemes seem quite ordinary, but synthesized and arranged as they have been by Naylor and Butler, along with other African American writers, the mythemes assume a meaning and a motive that are quite extraordinary.

3.1 TIME MYTHEME in the African American Journey

First, the TIME mytheme in Naylor and Butler's journey motif serves a structural frame for the events, conveys a subliminal message about its historical time period, and provides a plain pathway for the working out of ideas central to the female protagonists. The novels begin and end in PRESENT TIME. The female protagonists, Willa and Dana, depart the PRESENT, crossing against their volition into a past whose events directly affect the present and the definition of self. In ***Linden Hills,*** PRESENT time is the Christmas season, beginning December 19th and ending at midnight on December 24th, the beginning of Christmas Day, five to six days. This holiday time is to celebrate the coming of the redeemer, Christ, the one who will save them all from damnation; however, it is being used as a time of condemnation. In ***Kindred***, PRESENT TIME is the month from June 9th , the time of Dana's birthday, to July 4th, 1976, Independence Day, the time celebrating and anticipating freedom from colonial oppression. The Time mytheme incorporates a temporal disposition that may be referenced as *temporal deixis*: it has an "orientation or position that lies within the perspective of the one referring to the actions and events in time." Willa and Dana's temporal deixis incorporate references to the 'now' and to the 'then', the present and the past.

Their journeys are marked semantically by the morphemic affixes of *pre-, ante-* and *post-* as in *antebellum*, *post-bellum*, *pre-Civil Rights*. These markers give aspects of time as they refer to the ways in which actions and states are viewed. The deictic orientation of the journeys in these works demonstrate meanings "independent of the means used to convey it" (Finegan 204); that is, each is a meaning-filled entity. As the mythemes of temporal deixis are affixed to and conjoined with the other journey mythemes—the place mytheme(spatial deixis) and the persona mytheme (personal deixis)—their usage adds multi-leveled depths of meaning. The temporal deixis mytheme adds connotations of the physical, the historical, and the psychological to the journey toward self-identity for the femheras.

Our femheras, Willa and Dana, begin and end their journey within the framework of PRESENT TIME. But they both go to and from the historic past, presenting a kind of cyclical progression that represents a PRESENT PROGRESSIVE aspect of TIME. As the femheras travel back and forth in time, covering over 150 years, they recognize that the effects of those past events are still ongoing in their impact on the present and could and would influence the future unless dealt with in the now. The expected outcome of any heroic journey is to bring it to completion with victory. Even though Willa and Dana had been experiencing the tests of their journey in historical contexts, a past perfect progressive, they have also been realizing the significance of their experience, a present perfect progressive aspect of time The current time must bring the trials of their journey to completion. Therefore the TIME mytheme as used by Naylor and Butler for their femheras moves through the PRESENT PROGRESSIVE and transforms into a past effect onto the now, the PRESENT PEFECT PROGRESSIVE, still incomplete, not fully realized.

Each journey outward into the past brings them closer and closer to their PRESENT. The PAST is the real of experience, while the PRESENT is the time of contemplation and reassessment of obligations and debts to the past, as well as responsibilities to the present and the future. The significance of what is learned from past events comes to bear upon the intents and actions of the present. In ***Linden Hills,*** Willa goes back into four historic times.

The first journey back takes Willa to the antebellum decades of the 1830s and '40s, the decades of the first Mrs. Luther Nedeed. Mrs. Luwana Packersville Nedeed recorded in her family Bible the impact of that enslaved life time. The laws of the time allowed a free Black man to buy an enslaved Black woman for marriage. Luwana moves from an enslaved single woman to an enslaved married woman. Willa's next journey out is to the post-bellum decades around the 1890s, the era of new Jim Crow laws, socio-economic isolation, and gender marginalization. Now this second Mrs. Nedeed, Evelyn Creton, records her life story in her cookbook journal. She is noting in her time similar marital circumstances as the first Mrs. Nedeed. Then the third journey takes Willa back to the 1930s, the era of the Great Depression, the pre-Civil Rights era; it makes her relive the recorded life of Mrs. Luther Nedeed the Third, Priscilla MGuire, through a collection of family photographs. The fourth journey back goes to the recent past. The fourth Mrs. Luther Nedeed, Willa's mother-in-law, leaves only a photo with no other record, no name, and no impression of herself nor of her son, the Luther who is Willa's husband.

> Now in present time, Willa experiences the trauma of marital servitude:
> The clock on the morgue wall ticked for the sixtieth time past midnight. She sat on the edge of the cot with her son's head resting on her shoulder. The limp body was hugged to her chest while the pale, shriveled arms and legs dangled behind her back. . . . Hours ago she had decided that she would scream no more. . . . Time. You let time take your son, now let it take you. . . . But she waited for for the door to open. Surely Luther would unlock the door since the child was sick. He was testing her. . .. (65-66)

Willa's current journey through time replicates more traumatically the lives of her ancestral Mrs. Nedeeds.

While Willa travels through historic time, emotionally and introspectively—by means of print records, Dana travels physically across time into the historic past—to live the lives she has read about. They both visit a matriarchal past. Willa's physical deprivation and isolation encourages her empathy with the pain of her Nedeed mothers; Dana'a physical separation in time and place encourages her new understandings of the pain of her natural mothers.

> Dana, with Alice at her side, witnesses Alice's father being beaten:
> I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. . . . But I hadn't lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me. (36)

Dana's twentieth century awareness is not fully equipped to relive the nineteenth century slave narrative she has seen re-enacted. Because dramatizations freeze time, Dana's five visits into the antebellum past cover more time than is exhausted in her comparable present time. Hours in the past are only seconds in the present. One visit keeps her for eight months in the past but for only a few hours in the present. Her first journey back into her maternal past takes her to1808; her second journey back is to 1815; the third is to 1819; the fourth is to 1826; and the final one is approximately in 1835. During these times, Dana visits a plantation and its slave quarters, and she meets slave owners, enslaved blacks, and free blacks, including her 'several times great grand' mother, Alice Greenwood. Dana lives near or with Alice and experiences life with her as Alice grows from just a toddler to the mother of Hagar Weylin, Dana's foremother. Here we notice again the impact of Christianity on the lives of enslaved African American women. Dana's foremother uses her Bible to begin the record of Dana's family history.

This connection of Dana and Willa to the importance of the Bible, as a religious and moral guide, an historical legacy, and a record of genealogy for the Black family is significant to the meaning of time as well as to other ideas purported in their novels. While enslaved Blacks, by law, were prohibited from learning to read and write, and certain aspects of Christianity and Bible studies were used to keep them mentally and spiritually enslaved, they used the Bible as a model text for literacy practice and used their religious gatherings for literacy classes. A writer, as is Dana, must study the past, through the records available, to learn its customs, the ways of the times, the lay of the land, the system of servitude or slavery. But, as Butler places Dana in that time zone, one does not truly understand, no matter how much reading of the sparsely recorded events of slaves lives, until her experiences match theirs, until she has walked in their paths with them.

Thus, Dana is transported through time carrying with her the knowledge given in the family Bible, to learn from Weylin's 1815 library the source of her beginnings. Ultimately, Willa and Dana both examine the enslaved life of their past by living it in the present. And upon contemplating their present existence, they begin to understand, more and more clearly, the nature of their servitude and that of their twentieth-century black female selves.

3.2. PLACE MYTHEME in the Psychohistorical Journey

The TIME mytheme, temporal deixis, is important to the narrative construct; however, it does not function independently nor does it supersede the PLACE mytheme. For just as Dana and Willa cycle to and from the past, they circulate also within a physical sphere of action, and an equally significant psychological sphere of contemplation, recognition, and revelation. Their journey is also defined by spatial deixis; there is a marking of their orientation or position in their physical or metaphysical space through their pronominal referents "that," "there," "this" and "here". The *that* and the *there* refer to a "remote—relatively distant position from the speaker" whereas the *this* and the *here* indicate an "approximate position of the vicinity or relationship that is close to the speaker"(Finegan 204). When the femheras, Willa and Dana, begin their journeys, they are in spaces that are remote to them—the *that* and the *there.* As they become closer to the end of their journey, they move more toward the reference space of the *this* and the *here*. Gloria Naylor and Octavia Butler's PLACE mytheme is African America: isolated, remote both physically and psychologically, unlike any other America represented otherwise in Western tradition. Naylor and Butler's PLACE, as estimated in the words of Thelma Shinn (1985), is "within the [small] enclosure of patriarchal society," in spite of or because of which, women persevere to preserve a female knowledge.[vi]

Naylor's PLACE for Willa is the old morgue in the cellar of Luther Nedeed's house. Willa and her son, whom she named Sinclair when his father would not claim him as the next Luther, were placed there by her husband, Luther, to "turn her into a wife" (19). To that Luther adds "let her stay down ***there*** with her bastard son and think about what she'd done . . . . Think about who she is playing with" (20). Intended as a prison and punishment for Willa's being 'out of order', that physical space in the dark, damp basement of the Nedeed mansion presents not only the traumatic trial and test that begins the journey, but it also leads her on a journey of reconnecting with self-discovery. Willa's place symbolizes that of all of the residents of Linden Hills. Catherine Ward affirms this PLACE mytheme in the journey motif when she says that Naylor's *Linden Hills* is "a modern version of Dante's *Inferno* in which souls are damned not because they have offended God or have violated a religious system but because they have offended themselves. In their single-minded pursuit of upward mobility, the inhabitants of Linden Hills, a black, middle-class suburb, have turned away from their past and from their deepest sense of who they are"(Ward 67).

Comparatively, not a morgue, a place for the dead, but an enclosure filled with the remnants of time is Butler's PLACE of departure for Dana. Dana has just moved to a modest house in Altadena, California, , and she is compelled to travel out to a more confining PLACE, some part of the Weylin plantation, especially the Weylin house, in Baltimore, Maryland, never too far from the site of a Rufus-centered mishap. Dana lives in Rufus's house, visits Rufus's slave quarters, but seeks refuge in Alice's house. She learns first-hand the life of the slave, the life of the supposedly free blacks, as were Alice and her mother. She is living there. And she is witnessing the life of the master and the hapless, sometimes mindless, white mistress of the plantation.

As Willa completes one phase of her psychohistorical journey, she returns from her euphoric dream state to view her morgue prison. She examines her life by comparing it with the life of the Mrs. Nedeed she has just visited. She always comes away somehow uncomfortable with her present place in relationship to the world, meaning Luther. Comparatively, when Dana returns to the safety of her Altadena home, she is psychologically altered, for she feels uncomfortable in the present, feeling confined to it and fearing being caught and trapped in the past. Never before had she fully realized the nature of her ancestor's experiences during slavery until she had actually lived in her place: a free black had no more rights than did an enslaved black, had no more freedom than the nearest white would allow.

By examining the psychology of place, Naylor and Butler create a new meaning along with a new sensibility for the meaning of a PLACE mytheme, for place is not only physical, it is also social, emotional, and spiritual. TIME and PLACE combine to bring stronger, deeper meaning in the psychohistorical journey for African American women..

3.3. THE PERSONA MYTHEME in the Psychohistorical Journey.

Willa and Dana traveled to and fro in space and time, the spatial deixis and the temporal deixis, not only physically and emotionally but also historically and psychologically, experiencing in their twentieth century place what their 19th century selves endured. The semantic implications of their lives connotes a *personal deixis.* How do they see and refer to themselves? Are they referencing, recognizing, and seeing themselves (I, me, my), or are they marking themselves within the territory of the dominant male figures in their lives (he, him, his)? Whereas the "I" and the "my" indicate themselves in the primary first person the "he" and "his" mark focus of the male and place themselves as belonging to that person (Finegan 201-203). As a result of their physical experiences and their psychological probings, Willa and Dana have developed two lives—the external and the internal. Externally, they encounter the trials of human servitude, suffer tests of physical endurance, and bear the indignation of inconsequential women. Internally, they undergo a transformation of consciousness, the third element of the African American literary pattern of the journey motif: the PERSONA mytheme. The transformation of the PERSONA comes about as a result of the psychohistorical journeys taken through the lives of their matriarchal forebears.

The cost of the experience—their very lives—is not as dear as the lessons which must be learned and taught: not as much from the physical experience as from the contemplation of that experience. For, within the western tradition, the heroic male actively pursues the social as well as the physical conflicts of life—facing, fighting, and overcoming obstacles and physical trials; his female counterpart, the Western female heroine, is compelled to turn within to the passive, contemplative life to which she has been assigned. Naylor and Butler alter that tradition by making their female protagonists, the femheras, not only contemplative but also active. The female travelers, Willa and Dana, experience a psychohistorical journey. Their trials require an examination of the matrilineal past for its affect and its meaning for their present lives, their sense and understanding of who they are, their personal identity.

Willa examined the shattered lives of the Mrs. Nedeeds—the wives, the mothers, the women—who had lived for the last 150 years in the same house, with the same name, and to virtually the same man, Luther Nedeed, as she lived now, all Luther except her son, Sinclair. These women tell their stories through the means usually allowed to the province of women—the Bible, the cookbook, and the photo album, all meant for reading, looking and following. These totems ordered by a patriarchal society represent the "dominating ideology [which defines] the boundaries of acceptable female behavior from the 1820's . . . [termed] the 'cult of true womanhood'" and continuing through the 20th century and into the 21st century (Carby 23). Barbara Welter, a feminist historian, describes its basic tenets:

> The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, [and] her neighbors, could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. . . . . With them she was promised happiness and power.(21; qtd in Carby 23)

Does Willa and her ancestral Mrs. Luther Nedeeds pass the virtue test? These Mrs. Nedeed discoveries in Willa's life raise the questions that inform the mytheme for the PERSONA of the femhera. Are their efforts toward piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity recognized by their marital mate? Do these efforts toward cardinal virtue give them happiness and power? Willa's first discovery, that Luwana was owned by, and therefore enslaved to, her own son, questions her role as mother, her connectedness to the ur-mother. It also caused her to consider her place in Luther's life. Was she his property instead of his wife? Luther, at age 30, a cold, ultra-standard precisionist, had gone shopping for a woman like her at his 10th college reunion. He was looking for a mature woman who "had never managed to marry at all by that time" (purity) (67) and who could manage efficiently the chores of the household and give him a son (domesticity and submissiveness).

Willa's second discovery—that Evelyn Creton used recipes for love, beauty, and perfection to gain affection never intended for her—raises still another question. What, indeed, is the role of a woman, wife or mistress? Who is she to her husband? Is she an emotional mate or just legal property? As her psychohistorical journey toward self-definition continues into the 20th century, Willa realizes that little has changed about the relationship between the men and women in the Nedeed family history.

This, her third discovery, presents a third set of questions. When the photographs of Priscilla McGuire Nedeed reveal a lovely young woman who was cast into the shadow of her son and finally reduced to a rubbed out spot, Willa questions her own existence as a person, as a singular individual, as a woman. Is it only her body that was wanted for bearing a son who could replicate his father? Was not her child also to represent his mother? Just as Naylor's Willa explores her self and her individuation through a psychohistorical journey toward self-identity, Butler's Dana encounters similar trials. Dana addresses the same virtual questions for her ancestral mothers. Despite their efforts toward piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, why were they reduced to non-entities?

Butler uses a similar series of experiences to bring about Dana's ultimate transformation into the black female heritage hero, the femhera. Dana lives the femheraic life. A male persona figures as villainously in Dana's adventures as it does in Willa's. Rufus, her white "several times great grandfather"(28), summons Dana to historical Baltimore whenever he is in danger of losing his life. Dana saves Rufus's life five times: First, when he is four or five years old, she saves him from drowning (13-14); then, when he is about eight, she saves him from burning himself up in his father's house (19-20). On her third trip when she is accompanied by Kevin, her husband—whom she thinks of as a "kindred spirit"—she rescues Rufus who has broken a leg by falling from a tree. In the fourth journey, Dana saves Rufus again; now 18 or 19, he is knocked unconscious by a slave when he tries to rape the slave's wife, Alice—she is Dana's "several times great grandmother" (117-126). The fifth, and penultimate adventure, occurs when Rufus is 25 years old and in charge of the plantation "owning and trading in slaves," "maybe . . . never . . . as hard as his father was, but . . . a man of his time"(242). He almost dies of pneumonia after passing out drunk in a ditch during a powerful rain storm.

After the sixth, and final journey, Dana experiences the final confrontation, as Willa does after her last discovery about the previous Mrs. Nedeeds. Dana is only able to return from the other world when something scares her enough to make her fear for her life. She addresses the "me" and the "my" in her family history. After her last venture, Dana realizes, when she takes the knife and cuts her wrist, that she has enough control of her life to "make living look better to me than killing and dying"(246). Now, on this last journey, she realizes that the only way to save herself and, in effect, save her family, is to stop Rufus, as Willa realizes she must stop Luther.

3.4: Confronting Self-Identity

In this final confrontation, the femheras undergo a transformation of consciousness which confronts "the ideologies of womanhood" whose negative stereotypes were created in slavery and are still perpetuated in contemporary society's doctrines, opinions, and ways of thinking about women (Carby 21-22). Naylor and Butler transform the female persona. They unmask the disguises and demystify the images of women as mistress and slave "by representing and reconstructing history . . . from particular viewpoints under specific historical conditions" (Carby 22). Willa declares herself a "good girl," a "good mother," and a "good wife," when she becomes resolved to reach a clear answer to a simple "how" question: "How did she come to be exactly where she was?"(p.278). She realizes it began by choice, her choice to marry Luther Nedeed and to assume the name Mrs. Nedeed. Now, after considering the history of how they came together almost seven years earlier, she becomes determined to keep the name Willa Nedeed because "she had a perfect right to respond to . . . any verbal or written request directed toward that singular identity" (278). Because just one year after she became a wife, she gave birth to a son, that made her a mother. She fed him, bathed him, guided him to learn the difference between right and wrong and continuously gave him her attention and her time: evidence that she was a good mother (279). Not only had she been tending to their son for the last six years, but she had also been tending to her husband.

She had been cleaning his house, cooking his meals, arranging his clothes, organizing his social engagements, having attentive, mindful conversations with him without complaining about their having separate bedrooms or about all those nights that she spent alone because of his distance, distraction, and lack of including her in his life. She declares: "Willa Nedeed was a good mother and a good wife. For six years, she could claim that identity without reservations" (p.279). So how did it happen that she was now no longer a mother, nor a wife, and down in this cold, dark, damp, dead space? Her answer: she walked down those steps into that space away from her home and her self; now she must reverse her journey and go back up to reclaim that which was rightfully hers. Willa's transformation is evidenced in her climbing the stairs and emerging from the morgue cellar, through the unsuspected aid of Willie "her kindred spirit" who had unknowingly heard her cries for help.

She goes back up to put into order the disorder created by the ambiguities—submission to Luther's dominance—in her life which had placed her among the dead, among the non-people. Just as Willa goes up in transformation, so does Dana. Dana's transformation is evidenced in her going up to the attic to escape Rufus and his time by whatever means necessary, including endangering her own life. Willa grabs Luther; together they fall toward the fire which engulfs them and the house, ending their lives but freeing society of Nedeed's deadly ambiguity, somewhat of a statement for womankind as well as for humankind. Dana struggles to free herself from Rufus's grasps, but he holds to her arm even though she stabs him; he's refusing to give up in death what he loathed to lose in life, his possession of Dana. Dana had said once before about Rufus, as he held her with a formidable grip, that talking to him "was like talking to the wall of the house" (238). And so Rufus dies, still holding on to her; Dana's arm is pinioned in the wall of the house as she returns to her world. She has lost her arm, but she has saved the future of her family and her self.

The femhera suffers irreparable loss: for Willa, life, for Dana, limb. The cycles of the journey come to rest not in peace and welcoming reconnection with society, but in agonizing pain with victory and also in physical deprivation with loss. However, even with their loss, they triumph over their adversary, setting the example for their kin and their kind, that to be what you should be you must take the risk and stand up for who you are. Because history cannot be loosed from its grasp on the now, the present aspect of time can never really be "perfect." Each active and conscious journey back returns the persona to a new, now psychological place.

Conclusive Summary: In the hands of African American novelists Naylor and Butler, the structure of the journey motif becomes a new, perhaps xenogenetic, being, the product of a creation, an origination, or an evolution unlike or foreign to others of its kind. While not entirely unlike its forebears in appearance, it is completely different in substance. Annie Pratt points out this difference in reference to her outline of women's quest for rebirth:

> [That this outline] seems to parallel in its figures and sequences such formulae as Jung's quest for individuation, Campbell's adventure of the hero, and Frye's romance journey should not lead one to assume fundamental analogies between the way that these archetypalists perceive their material and the way women authors present similar archetypes. The differences between the way that men and women writers and scholars perceive archetypes derive . . . from their different experiences in society (138).

The mythemes of time, place, and persona—temporal, spatial, and personal deixis-- make the substantive difference. In Naylor and Butler's transformation, the journey is a movement through time, mentally and physically; their time is specifically historical, the now as well as the then. And ultimately, the female persona, the femhera, in Naylor and Butler's explication of the journey toward self identity, accomplishes a "mastery" over adversity and completes the cycle of return not as a highly honored victor—except in the vision of their kindred spirits—but as a femheraic victim, a martyr, having sacrificed herself for the family and the society she sought to save and rejoin. By means of these three meaning-filled mythemes—TIME, PLACE, and PERSONA—in the journey motif, African-American writers redefine the journey in terms that are specific to their own heritage and culture. Thereby, contemporary African American women writers, in the act of redefinition, make the xenogenesis complete: the organization, creation, and evolution of their psychohistorical journey toward self-identity. They transform the image of the heroine from passive to active.

They confront the trials and address the tribulations; they stare-down the ideologies of womanhood as perpetuated in stereotypes and reconstruct in its stead the individuated self of the female hero, the Black femhera.

Naylor and Butler, through their femheras, Willa and Dana, declare, "Don't give up who you are to become what someone else says you ought to be!"

We've come through the storms and rain, heart ache, and pain,
Living from day to day, trying hard to find our way!
We keep holdin' on! Livin' the blues has made us strong!
No matter what, we know we can take it!
No doubt about it, we gonna make it!
Livin' the blues has made us strong! (Sounds of Blackness)

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[i] ***Linden Hills*** (Ticknor and Fields, 1985). All references to the novel are to this publication. It is the second of three published novels. The first, ***The Women of Brewster Place*** **(1983)** won the American Book Award and the third, ***Mama Day*** (1988), which later appeared as a film, has her central character forecast by Willa in ***Linden Hills***. Her fourth novel is ***Bailey's Café*** (1992).

[ii] Octavia Butler, a science fiction writer, has numerous short works to her credit as well as several novels, five of which are in the ***Patternmaster*** **saga:** ***Patternmaster*** (1976), ***Mind of My Mind*** (1977), ***Survivor*** (1978), ***Wild Seed*** (1980), and ***Clay's Ark*** (1984). Other novels are in the **Xenogenesis** series: ***Dawn*** (1987), ***Adulthood Rites*** (1988), and ***Imago*** (1989).

[iii] All references to ***Kindred*** are to the 1988 Beacon Press publication with an introduction by Robert Crossley, in the Black Women Writers Series edited by Deborah E. McDowell.

[iv] Gail Campbell, "Gloria Naylor," Interview. Baltimore, MD. ***Sun*** , 19 Oct. 1983. During this interview, Naylor reveals that her journal writings evolved into "Twilight Zone-type stories; . . . "they were sort of supernatural stories, delving into what's behind closed walls. It sort of fascinated me as a kid."

[v] Henry Louis Gates . Other works about African survivals in African American culture include Robert Farris Thompson, ***Flash of the Spirit***; Okon E. Uya, "The Culture of Slavery: Black Experiences Through a Filter" in ***Afro-American Studies*** 1 (1971): 209; and William Bascom, ***Shango in the New World*** (Austin: African and Afro-American Institute, University of Texas, 1972). See Gates, p. 259, note 4, for other helpful literature on the subject.

[vi] Thelma J. Shinn, "The Wise Witches: Black Women Mentors in the Fiction of Octavia E. Butler, ***Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition***, Ed. Majorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985): 203. Shinn used three archetypal systems—(1) the Demeter/Kore and Ishtar/Tammuz rebirth myths, (2) Arthurian grail narratives, and (3) the Craft of the Wise, or witchcraft—to analyze the role of African American women in fiction as defined by Annis Pratt with Barbara White, Andrew Loewenstein, and Mary Wyer, ***Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*** (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981).