

BLACK FEMINIST UTOPIANISM AND
GLORIA NAYLOR'S *MAMA DAY*

by

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A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts in the Department of English
in the Graduate School of
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2021

ABSTRACT

The feminist utopia was a prominent literary genre for women writers throughout the 1900s. Otherworldly separatist societies in novels such as *Herland* (1915) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *The Female Man* (1975) by Joanna Russ featured speculative elements to present feminist issues to readers and advocate for a space created by and for women. But often lacking from popular depictions of feminist utopianism is the inclusion or even the presence of Black women's voices and perspectives. Many of the most integral texts of the "feminist utopian" genre are largely white-centered and feature white women's voices at the forefront. The questions then arise: where do Black women and their voices enter in? Is there such a thing as a Black feminist utopia?

I posit that Black feminist utopian literature does exist, but that it often does not align with the same set of standards that a non-Black feminist utopia, as it was popularly conceived by 20th century white women writers, would adhere to. This project seeks to locate and articulate possible features of Black feminist utopianism that may then allow such fictions to be 'read' as utopian. Some of these characteristics may include connections to African folk traditions, a focus on the lived experiences of Black women and their communities, and a home place that is created against systemic oppression. Through a Black feminist theoretical approach, I will illustrate how possible Black feminist utopias exist in many spaces and places, with Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* as an exemplary text. Through the figure of Sapphira Wade, who is mother, goddess, and creator of the utopia, and through her descendants, nuanced portrayals of traditions

such as conjure take prominence. And the island itself is a liminal home for a community that challenges Western paradigms, in a space that is built and owned by its people. In her depiction of the island of Willow Springs and the women of the Day family, Naylor presents us with one version of a Black feminist utopia, and in particular, one that endures through its centering of Black women's intersectional experiences.

DEDICATION

For my parents, who supported me in every way possible, so that I could strive towards a degree I loved, and in particular, my mom, who I called at least twice a day over the past two years and will continue to call every day for many years to come. For my friend Ciara and our weekly Saturday movie nights filled with food and conversation, without which I would not have survived graduate school. For my friend Eva, who lent me her ear and sent me a card at the beginning of my graduate school career that reminded me that my worth goes beyond any degree. None of this would be possible without these loving people in my life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank my committee chairperson, Dr. Yolanda Manora, for encouraging me to pursue an idea that was only just forming and seeing the potential in it. This project would not be possible without her and the time she has put into my work, empowering me to see myself as a literary scholar. I also thank my committee members, Dr. Andy Crank and Dr. Robin Boylorn. Through my classes with Dr. Crank, I was reminded about my interest in literature, and his sincerity and dedication as a professor helped me thrive as a student and scholar. I am appreciative that this project gave me the opportunity to meet Dr. Boylorn, and I am thankful that she has given her time and scholarly expertise towards my project. To my committee as a whole, I thank them for lending me their critical eye and showing interest in my project. Working on this during a global pandemic where uncertainty lies around us was certainly a feat that could not have been accomplished without their support, and I am incredibly grateful for the work they have put into this thesis, in spite of our sole communication being through Zoom calls and e-mails.

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I. INTRODUCTION

“If black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression.”

—The Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement”

“Dreaming itself is an act of rebellion... By simply imagining and claiming a right to a better, freer life, women reject the lives we are allowed and the people we are allowed to be.”

—Alexandra Brodsky and Rachel Kauder Nalebuff, *The Feminist Utopia Project*

The concept of utopia has been examined, reformulated, and reconceptualized by scholars of utopian studies throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Utopia as an imagined ideal, a genre, and, in some cases, a medium for change is repeatedly defined and redefined by literary academics and authors alike. And yet, in many ways, the definition of utopia is still static. The most common and colloquial understanding of utopia is that of the “perfect” community—an imaginary, otherworldly place where people live in harmony without the trappings of our current society. As Ruth Levitas writes in *The Concept of Utopia*, “Utopia is about how we live and what kind of world we would live in if we could do just that. The construction of imaginary worlds, free from difficulties that beset us in reality, takes place in one form or another in many cultures” (1). According to Lyman Tower Sargent, utopia is a kind of “social dreaming” (“The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” 1), and Lucy Sargisson claims that utopianism is “an umbrella term referring to a way of approaching the world to subsequent ways of representing what is perceived in the world” (1). Much of utopia, then, is a way to consider and reflect upon our own society and utilize that consideration to imagine the world at its best, as Levitas continues, “Utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being” (5).

There are, of course, flaws within this line of thinking though. Despite the apparent conceptual limitlessness of utopia, its sense of idealism is seen as restricting for some, for “the very term of utopia suggests to most people that this dream of the good life is an impossible dream—an escapist fantasy, at best a pleasant but pointless entertainment” and that “Those utopians who seek to make their dreams come true are deemed to be hopelessly unrealistic, or worse, actively dangerous” (Levitas 1). Many may assume that utopia, in its vision of perfection, is simply an escape away from the realities of the world. It is seen as uncritical in its lack of realism, and in some cases, even harmful in its articulation of idealism. Colloquially, “utopian” is occasionally said with a tone of cynicism and has become synonymous with a sense of naivety. As Alex Zamalin writes, “In common usage, [utopia] names anything that seems too idealistic. Utopia is, in other words, something that is embraced at youth but abandoned at maturity” (3). But, Levitas and others in the scholarly community of utopian studies counter these assumptions, claiming that utopia “is not escapist nonsense but a significant part of human culture” (Levitas 2) and that “utopias—or at least important utopias—are not impossible at all, but derive their significance from the fact that they are realistic” (Levitas 4-5). Rather than being an impossible dream, then, utopian visions might instead imagine societies of possibility—instead of a perfect society, perhaps, a *better* society. The question arises, then—a better society for whom? For if it is true that utopia cannot be reduced to simply a naïve fantasy of the immature, then the wishful thinking of utopian ideologies could result in profound articulations of a better society for *all*, one that is equitable and would, ultimately, promote visions of social change. But, past articulations of utopianism have shown that this has not been a focus for early writers of utopian fiction, especially in the presence, or absence, of race in these supposedly ‘better’ worlds.

What is often missing from this purportedly ‘better’ picture of utopian society is race, possibly because the imagined community in a utopia is most commonly seen as ‘raceless.’ Many of the most popular utopian works, beginning with Thomas More’s *Utopia* all the way to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*, often lack significant discussion or centering of race. One might argue that an explanation for this may be that some utopias were written as ‘post-race’ civilizations. Within the ideology that race is socially constructed, then in a “better” world, perhaps one could make the case that race as a concept disappears entirely. John Lovchik writes in *Racism: Reality Built on Myth*, while “Racism takes its name from race,” there is really “no such thing as race, or races of humans. There never has been. It is a myth... [used] to justify treating some people as inferior. Race did not lead to racism; it was simply a convenient justification for the ranking of human beings that has come to be called racism” (“Introduction”). Race is a constructed phenomenon, and perhaps this is why in a utopian society, especially one written by someone who does not face racism, race would not exist at all. But, even if race is constructed, its presence and its consequences still exist in our social world—the realities of racism are not a myth. To ignore race by simply not acknowledging it would also mean ignoring racism and its realities. Even in our contemporary society there is the desire to move ‘beyond race,’ to think past racial situations, particularly for those unaffected by the lived realities of race. As Ventura explains, “This desire to just get over, to have racism just be done, is part of typical race talk in large segments of US society where it is assumed that those who talk about race are the so-called real racists” (35). For some, engaging with subjects of race and racism is somehow seen as a kind of “giving in” to race. If race is a social construct, this kind of logic assumes that denying race would rid one’s self of racism. This “race talk” can also be seen in the predominant texts of utopian literature, where race is barely mentioned under the guise of moving ‘beyond

race.’ But utopian fictions’ attempted move beyond race does not actually address race or racism in these utopias, and instead these utopias become white-centered spaces rather than so-called ‘post-race’ spaces. For, race may be socially constructed, but racism and racial oppression are real structural issues of society and must still be contended with in any utopian imagination. Rather than creating a non-racist utopia, or a raceless utopia, it is more important to create an anti-racist utopia—one that acknowledges racialized hierarchies and works to dismantle structural racism. The post-race utopia does not address constructed hierarchies; it ignores them. The result is a world where race is seemingly absent, but racial oppression is not overcome and continues to exist in the imaginary, even if it is not seen. The only voices present in the supposed raceless utopia are white voices. Those who are not a part of the white race, then, are also absent and unseen, and therefore do not have a voice of any kind in the post-race utopian world. Raceless utopian societies ultimately end up ignoring the realities of race and racism, therefore invalidating the experiences of those who contend with racism and rendering them invisible and voiceless. If the purpose of utopia is to create a truly better society, then race must be addressed and understood as a fundamental part of that society.

If we are to contend with race and seek ‘a better way of being’ (Levitas 5) through anti-racism, then there is great potential in utopian thinking for people of color, who deal with real issues of structural inequity in society. Utopian thinking allows for the imagination of a world that addresses and dismantles these inequities, embodies anti-racism, and envisions a space where non-white people can not only live, but thrive. As Ventura claims, “Utopia, as ‘social dreaming,’ offers a powerful way to confront racism by presenting new spaces for questioning and new prospects for inventing society rather than merely adjusting to what exists” (29). Utopia provides the opportunity to move beyond oppressive forces and imagine new possibilities in

ways that are unachievable in our current society. The concept here would not be a post-race utopia but a utopia that is centered upon people who have been subjected to constructions of race and oppressed by racism, where marginalized voices are at the forefront. But, again, the fine line between realism and idealism becomes even more apparent when examining race in utopia. There is “pushback” when the concept of race and utopia is introduced, for “utopia is dismissed as just so naïve” (Ventura 34). But this critique, as Ventura explains it, is “shorthand for... skepticism about the idea of futurity itself—at least in figuring utopia as the horizon—skeptics can conceptualize this orientation as a movement toward futuristic escapism” (34). It is understandable that this skepticism exists. When the realities of racism and oppression are so severe, focusing on a utopian future seems frivolous and even potentially harmful. Many may question the benefit of utopia and race when racial justice work already happens in reality and when real lived oppression is experienced in our current society. But, in spite of these very real concerns, there is a sense of possibility in utopia that can lead to greater racial justice work. Imagining a more just world with racial equity can lead to radical change on the ground. According to Ventura, articulating race in utopia already positions it in the everyday:

Bringing race and utopia together is not an attempt to paper over racism but an attempt to root utopia-as-resistance to the everyday where race and racism reside. To see utopia as part of the everyday is not to undercut the need for radical, structural, revolutionary transformation but to see that struggle evidenced not only in the sometimes fantastic worlds of utopias but also as imminent in everyday life where race is defined and racism flourishes. (41)

If utopia is the envisioning of a better future, then it is important that such a future includes race and racial justice. And yet, such discussion of race and utopia has been largely absent from scholarship on utopian studies, despite the fact that many potential works of African American literature might be read as Black utopian fictions. As Dohra Ahmad claims in the book *Landscapes of Hope*, “the black literary utopia has yet evaded serious study” (131). Little has

been written so far regarding race and utopia, and major scholarship has only begun emerging in the last few years, with books like *Race and Utopian Desire in American Literature and Society* by Patricia Ventura and Edward K. Chan and *Black Utopia* by Alex Zamalin, both published in 2019. And, as a step further, little to no scholarship has been published on utopia, race, and gender. If utopia's true potential is to bring awareness to society's issues and to 'root utopia-as-resistance to the everyday,' then we must not only think about race, but race and gender, and if the primary visions of the 'better' worlds studied are only those that exclude Black women, then the question arises of if such worlds are truly *better*?

As Ahmad claimed, little so far has been written of race-centered utopias, especially that of Black literary utopias. One of the only articles on this topic is by Lyman Tower Sargent, who discusses iterations of African American utopias in the 2020 article "African Americans and Utopia," a work that provides necessary scholarship to a mostly absent perspective in the field of utopian literature. Sargent mentions that many of these African American utopian projects were written by Black women, and yet there is only one paragraph centering on Black women and utopia. Sargent has also compiled an online bibliography of utopian literature in "Utopian Literature in English: An Annotated Bibliography from 1516 to Present," which, when analyzed, does not seemingly account for the intersectional nature of Black feminist utopian projects. In the year 2020, the bibliography lists that there are 183 texts under the "African American" author category, as compared to 1,850 texts under "English" author category. To take it even further, there is no way to search for "African American woman" author, but the "Female" author keyword has 2,731 texts. While the "Female" author keyword could also include texts written by African American women, searching for these texts proves to be quite difficult. And not giving African American women a category denies the fact that African American women have

intersectional experiences that must be accounted for¹. While such a task of providing an online archive for utopian literature is a feat, it of course has its faults. This lack of intersectionality within the archive and in Sargent's article goes to show that the discussion of Black feminist utopianism is lacking in utopian studies. So, while feminist utopianism² has a rich scholarly history, and race-centered utopia is beginning to emerge (though with far less study), the Black feminist literary utopia seems to evade any study at all.

My project in this thesis is twofold: to critique the absence of Black feminist utopianism in literary scholarship and question why potential utopian texts have evaded significant study, and to read Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* as exemplary of Black feminist utopianism in literature. Some may claim that the Black feminist utopia simply does not exist or that there just is not enough literature written by Black women that include utopian elements. Sargent's "Utopian Literature in English" bibliography may lead to such a conclusion, as there seems to just not be *as much* African American utopian literature as compared to English utopian literature. I posit that this supposed absence of not only African American utopian literature, but more specifically, Black feminist utopian literature is not only untrue but does not do justice to the possibilities that exist in Black feminist utopianism. Instead, I argue that Black feminist utopias do exist, but that they do not adhere to the same standards as (non-Black) feminist utopianism, and therefore are not visible in utopian scholarship. For example, many feminist utopias are separatist colonies where the women can only thrive if men are absent. Black feminist utopias may challenge this aspect, for Black women must contend with both sexist and racist oppression,

¹ Intersectionality and its coinage by Kimberlé Crenshaw will be articulated more in the section "Literature Review: Black Feminist Thought."

² More discussion of feminist utopianism and its histories to follow.

and to become separatist would be to deny a large part of their community.³ Black feminist utopias, as centered in Black feminist theory, are also likely intersectional and therefore address multiple axes of oppression. As a result, a Black feminist utopia would be centered in Black women's lived experiences and the complexities that exist within those experiences. These aspects cannot be seen in the more generic feminist utopias that have been studied in utopian scholarship. And while many characteristics of feminist utopianism could be seen in Black feminist utopianism, such as a connection to nature, the centering of women's experiences, and a focus on the maternal or matrilineal, these aspects are only visible once we allow for the possibility of a utopia made for and by Black women. In order to create a space for Black feminist utopianism within utopian scholarship, we must address that the overarching characteristics of feminist utopianism are not the only standard by which to see utopian visions. We must incorporate Black feminist theoretical approaches to literature into utopian scholarship and begin to see Black feminist utopias, even where they may not have been seen before. My project, then, is to read Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* as a textual site and analyze the island of Willow Springs as a Black feminist utopia, centering Black feminist thought and Black women's lived experiences in utopian scholarship just as they are centered in the novel⁴. In doing so, I will locate and address characteristics that are unique to Black feminist utopianism and ones that are aligned with more traditional feminist utopias, in order to posit a clearer understanding of how

³ The complexities surrounding separatism and how communities like the Combahee River Collective have responded to calls for separatism will be discussed further later in this thesis.

⁴ This is not to say that *Mama Day* is the only text that could be read as such, for one of my projects is to see Black feminist utopian spaces within texts that are often not read as utopian. Other texts, which I will not explore to the extent that I do *Mama Day* include Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* and Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf*.

some African American women's literary texts could be read as potential Black feminist utopias, an exploration that is sorely missing from utopian studies.⁵

⁵ As an Indian American woman, I recognize that I lack a true understanding of the lived experiences and complexities that Black women must contend with. I wish to center Black women's voices in this thesis and write about this topic to bring up what I feel has been absent in popular discourse of utopian scholarship. I am reading a significant literary text – Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* – as utopian to bring light to the ways in which a utopia may function in manners that are not commonly understood or seen by much of the scholarly community, often because of the absence of focus and concentration on Black women's literature within utopian studies. In this regard I feel it imperative for me to focus my own scholarly attention towards Black women's voices and literature and to center these voices in my analysis.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Feminist Utopias

Before interpreting *Mama Day* as a Black feminist utopia, I find it necessary to first note the way in which feminist utopianism has been positioned in scholarship in order to read through and against such discourse. In particular, the feminist utopia as a genre gained increasing prevalence during the modernist period, both for writers of these fictional worlds and for scholars studying utopia and women's literature. The genre allowed for exactly what Levitas argued of utopia's potential—visions of a better world, specifically for women who contend with sexist oppression. While Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, published in 1915, is viewed as a seminal text of feminist utopianism, the idea of the feminist utopia can be seen long before that. One of the earliest conceptions of a potential "feminist utopia" is *The Book of the City of Ladies* written by Christine de Pizan in 1405. Even so, the earliest text written by a woman featured in the "Brief Chronology of Key Works of Utopian Literature and Thought" at the beginning of *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, is Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* published in 1666, where Cavendish writes of a woman who accidentally comes upon a utopian kingdom and becomes its empress. Many claim this work to follow more traditional ideals of utopianism, unlike Cavendish's other work, *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668) which I would argue is much more of a feminist utopia, featuring a version of a separatist colony of women, something that is a characteristic in many feminist utopias. Another vision of this separatism is seen in *Sultana's Dream* by Rokeya Sakhawat

Hossain, noteworthy because it depicts a feminist utopia that is non-white. In *Sultana's Dream* (1905) the narrator is visited in her dreams by a woman from the separatist Ladyland, which has implemented a reversal of *purdah* so that men are confined to the private sphere and women are free to live and lead in the public sphere. The story illuminates the issue of *purdah* in Hindu and Muslim cultures, condemning the practice while also claiming that if women were to be a part of the public sphere, they would make society much more innovative and progressive through technology and science. The feminist utopia by these standards is, as Lucy Sargisson claims, a transgressive space created by and for women (4). In all of these texts, to some degree, science fiction elements are utilized to present feminist issues through a world that imagines peace and equality between women who are separate from men and therefore maintain their power in their separatism. But, these texts, and others including but not limited to *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ, *The Dialectic of Sex* by Shulamith Firestone, and *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy, which are seen as the most significant of feminist utopian literature, do not center or even include Black women's voices and perspectives. Black women are largely absent from the most prominent feminist utopias of the late 20th century, and a Black women-centered utopia is seemingly missing from the canon of utopian studies. In this exclusion, these texts do not account for the experiences and lived realities of Black women, thus expressing that there is not a space for Black women's lives within the standards of non-Black feminist utopianism.

Before articulating the distinctions between Black feminist utopian standards and non-Black feminist utopianism, we can see that such divergences in utopian conventions have been made before, but for feminist utopianism against non-feminist, traditional utopianism. Lucy Sargisson in *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* explores the debate surrounding utopianism and feminism and sets the feminist utopia apart from popular conceptions of male-centered

utopias, like that of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*⁶. While More's *Utopia* is the text that arguably began utopian literature as a genre and therefore also utopian studies, Sargisson opposes the version of utopia as More depicted it, claiming that feminist utopias are not "blueprints for the perfect polity," which is a "commonly held view of what constitutes a utopia" (2). More's *Utopia* was written in 1516 in Latin and coined the term "utopia," which comes from two Greek words according to Fátima Vieira, "*ouk* (that means not and was reduced to *u*) and *topos* (place)" creating the word *ou-topos*, and then adding the suffix *ia*, to make 'utopia,' meaning 'no place' or 'nowhere' (4). More also may have been playing with the word 'utopia,' though, for there is another similar Greek term *eu-topos*, meaning 'good place.'⁷ In the very conception of the term "utopia," then, there is a sense of satire—by More's formation of the word, it is a good place that is also no place, and perhaps it therefore can never truly exist. Many scholars utilize More's earliest conception of utopia, like Sargisson herself who begins her book on utopia by defining it as "the good place which is no place" (1). But she also argues that the content of the More's *Utopia* does not necessarily align with contemporary conceptions of utopia, particularly feminist ones. *Utopia* centers on a Humanist society that exists on an island called "Utopia," where there is no private property and a general distaste for wealth and gold, but there is a system of free healthcare. There are issues in *Utopia* for contemporary readers, of course, especially those who consider race and gender in their analyses. Slavery is a common practice in More's *Utopia*, with

⁶ *Utopia*'s full title is *De optimo reipublicae statu deque nova insula Utopia Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivas* (*Of the best state law and the new island Utopia, truly a golden booklet, as beneficial as it is cheerful*).

⁷ The prefix of *eu-topos*, from which More also coined the term "eutopia," is "eu" meaning "good" or "well." This is of course, the prefix of other words such as "eugenics," which combines "good" and "born" to mean 'well-born,' and which Oxford Reference defines as the "study of methods of improving the quality of human populations." This term has been used to justify racial cleansing and other oppressive techniques to maintain white supremacy and racism. Therefore, an acknowledgment of this prefix and the historical use of it is necessary, even if this correlation cannot necessarily be assumed for More's conception of "eutopia," for utopia as a concept has been used by some to justify such racist practices.

every household having two slaves who are either foreigners or criminals. While More's *Utopia* was written in the 16th century, before America was founded as a slave-owning country, it is important to note that this is a major feature of More's *Utopia*, for the land in More's conception is only truly utopian for some and not all. Alessa Johns claims that feminists "have called into question utopias that depict static perfection" like that of More's *Utopia*, which she claims "epitomizes the traditional version" of utopianism" (174). Over time, of course, new meanings of utopia have diverged from More's original conception of the word. As Vieira discusses, utopia began as a "lexical neologism," which are "new words created to name new concepts or to synthesize pre-existing ones" but "over the centuries, after the process of deneologization, its meaning changed many times... the word utopia has itself often been used as the root for the formation of new words" including "eutopia, dystopia, anti-utopia, alotopia, euchronia, heterotopia, ecotopia, and hypertopia" all, what Vieira explains, are "derivation neologisms" (3). All these derivation neologisms of utopia make obvious how rife with conflict utopia as a concept is. Sargisson, as I've mentioned, is one such scholar who takes issue with the definitions of utopia as presented by More's *Utopia* in her discussion of contemporary feminist utopias.

Feminist scholars of utopianism, like Sargisson and Johns, make claims about how feminist utopianism is distinctly different from traditional articulations and conceptions of utopia as More conceived it. One such reason for the critique of traditional or 'blueprint,' 'classical' utopias is the absence of women, often leading to an understanding that "women... have fared poorly in traditional blueprint utopias, where they have been forced to labour endlessly and bow to humourless patriarchs" (Johns 174). Even so, utopia as a concept lends itself to utopian thinking, for "Utopia as a thought-experiment has consistently offered ways of altering people's perceptions" and the "utopian literary mode" in particular "has... always appeared useful to

feminist authors” (Johns 175). In similar ways to how I have discussed the possibilities in utopia for those concerned with race and race studies, the same has been said for those concerned with gender and feminist studies⁸. Women writers took it upon themselves to create feminist utopian visions as “one of the few modes available for feminist theorizing,” particularly to increase literacy and wealth for “European women in the eighteenth century” (Johns 175). There was another rush of feminist utopian literature during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, after what Johns calls a “lull in the production of utopian literature in the early nineteenth century” (175).⁹ While some of these feminist utopias share attributes with the traditional utopia first envisioned by More, many of them differ drastically in their content. One such distinction that Sargisson details is that “feminist utopias are political” in that “All are concerned to some extent with power relations, all with sexual power, some with the exploitative relations between patriarchy and nature” (17). While it could be said that even traditional utopias have an element of the political in them, Sargisson makes the claim here that the feminist utopia in particular is distinguished by its discussion of sexual power. Often in feminist utopianism this discussion of sexual power relations is configured through separatism. Where patriarchy claims that “Woman... is defined solely in relation to man” and that woman must be subordinate to man, the separatist feminist utopia provides a vision outside of that to establish power in women’s hands (Sargisson 171). Other important aspects of feminist utopian literature are the importance of education, a strong sense of community, scientific advances (particularly environmentally), and pragmatism in spite of the fantastical science fiction worlds (Johns 178-194). Notable, though, is

⁸ Of course, this then begs the question: “what about the intersection of race and gender?” which is ultimately the crux of my thesis.

⁹ Alessa Johns goes on to describe the history of feminist utopian literature in her article “Feminism and utopianism” in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*. She describes four periods of feminist utopianism: the late middle ages and the beginning of the early modern period, the eighteenth century, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the 1970s.

that all of these aspects are achieved by the feminist utopia supposedly *because of* its separatism. In the feminist utopia's eyes, women can achieve significant practical strides in education and science only through a separatist community that maintains its power away from men. And often in these utopian fictions, like that of *Herland* for example, this power and progress gets disrupted by men entering the feminist utopian space. Men are considered true outsiders of the 19th and 20th century feminist utopian space—they are perpetrators of violence and patriarchy and must be separated for the women in these utopias to maintain their power.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

B. Black Feminist Thought

As has been mentioned previously, in spite of the transgressive nature of feminist utopianism, it is obvious that the power afforded in these utopian spaces privileges specific women. Black women and their experiences are largely ignored in the feminist utopia, and while study of feminist utopianism has been crucial and paramount to utopian studies overall, we must contend with the lack of Black women's voices in these discussions. One such reason for this lack of study of utopias created by Black women or the inherent absence of Black voices in popular feminist utopias is a lack of understanding and integration of Black feminist thought into these discussions. In acknowledging the history of the exclusion of Black voices in the feminist movement and literary studies and the heterogenous, intersectionality of Black women's lives and experiences, we can better see and understand what Black feminist utopianism may look like.

Intersectionality

Much like the feminist utopia, Black feminist utopias are also inherently political, but they are not only concerned with sexual power and instead interrogate multiple power relations through the inherent intersectionality of Black women's experiences. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in her 1989 essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politic" where she discusses the consequences of treating "race and gender as

mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” for Black women (139). While she focuses on antidiscrimination law, Crenshaw also explains that the issue is reflected in “feminist theory and antiracist politics” and how there is a “multidimensionality of Black women’s experiences” which contrasts with the oft-used “single-axis analysis” that ultimately “distorts” Black women’s experiences (139). And, in addition to policy, feminist theory, and antiracist politics, Crenshaw’s discussion of the inherent discrimination of Black women in the denial of intersectional oppression can also apply to other fields, like literary studies and the literary canon. According to Crenshaw, centering Black women’s experiences would expose this inherent discrimination of utilizing single-axis frameworks, as she claims that “any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (140). Using this same ideology, then, centering Black women’s experiences would also benefit a field like literary studies, and more specifically in the case of my argument, utopian studies and utopian literature. The single-axis framework that Crenshaw introduces can be directly applied to feminist utopian literature and its scholarship so far, where feminist utopian scholarship has largely focused on the single issue of gender without accounting for race. To further explain this issue of the single-axis framework, Crenshaw brings in the well-known analogy of the traffic intersection to describe the experience of dealing with multiple forms of oppression. She explains:

Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (149)¹⁰

¹⁰ In the time since this analogy, which attempts to envision the multiplicity of oppression for Black women, was first introduced in this essay, intersectionality has become a kind of politic in itself, particularly with the emergence of “intersectional feminism.” This movement seeks to account for Crenshaw’s critique of law and policy, as well as the “marginalization of Black women in feminist theory and antiracist politics,” through the creation of a feminism that centers marginalized voices (Crenshaw 140). As intersectional feminism gained popularity, there have been

But this multiple axis discrimination is often not recognized because of the single-axis systems that govern society. This also applies to literary studies, where Black women's voices are not accounted for because of a kind of intersectional invisibility. As Barbara Smith describes in *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*, "Black women's existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these are in the 'real world' of white and/or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, unknown" (Smith). The single-axis framework renders invisible the complex and intersectional experiences of Black women and their lived realities. And Black women face this same discrimination in utopian studies, where they are unrepresented because of this single-axis framework and where scholarship is centered in the single-axis utopia. In order to disrupt this, an intersectional approach must be applied that centers Black women's voices and experiences, and the constructions of utopia that they create, through a Black feminist theoretical framework. Perhaps one reason this has not been vastly studied so far, though, is because of the historical absence and exclusion of Black feminism in the feminist movement.

The exclusion of Black women from the feminist movement

The single-axis framework that Crenshaw illustrates in her essay has existed to discriminate against and subjugate Black women far before our contemporary times. In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* bell hooks describes the long history of the exclusion of Black women in the feminist movement and the issues that Black women have faced (and continue to face) in having to choose which axis of oppression to center their attention on. As hooks explains, historically "Black women were placed in a double bind; to support women's

some critiques of it in recent years, especially in the ways in which it has become a buzzword that simplifies the meaning as Crenshaw originally intended it.

suffrage would imply that they were allying themselves with white women activists who had publicly revealed their racism, but to support only black male suffrage was to endorse a patriarchal social order that would grant them no political voice” (3). There was no intersectional movement that spoke to their experiences of both racist and sexist oppression, and within the feminist movement, “any talk of race was viewed as shifting the attention away from the politics of gender” (hooks xi). The “few black women” who decided to still continue to fight sexist oppression and “ally themselves with the feminist movement,” found backlash, too, for “Those who dared to speak publicly in support of women’s rights were attacked and criticized” (hooks 9). hooks explains that this led Black women to feel in “limbo,” as they were “not wanting to ally themselves with sexist black men or racist white women” (9). Neither movement could account for, or perhaps did not want to account for, the intersectional needs of Black women and the complex forms of oppression they faced. And, as hooks explains, “That black women did not collectively rally against the exclusion of our interests by both groups was an indication that racist-sexist socialization had effectively brainwashed us to feel that our interests were not worth fighting for, to believe that the only option available to us was submission to the terms of others” (9). The marginalization of Black women’s intersectional experiences in both the feminist movements and the anti-racist movements led to their exclusion in all spheres of society, including literary studies. Despite being “one of the most devalued female groups in American society” (hooks 108) and dealing with the ways in which “sexism operates both independently and simultaneously with racism” (hooks 7), Black women were not seen or heard in any space, feminist or anti-racist¹¹. Even so, as hooks discusses, “the struggle to end racism and the struggle

¹¹ This is not to say that Black women were actually absent from the feminist movement or from anti-racist work. In fact, much of the feminist movement, even from women’s suffrage, has much to owe to African American women. In “The Historical Evolution of Black Feminist Theory and Praxis,” Ula Taylor provides a historiography of Black feminist theory, and discusses how enslaved women campaigned for women’s suffrage in conjunction with abolition.

to end sexism were naturally intertwined, and to make them separate was to deny a basic truth of our existence, that race and sex are immutable facets of human identity” (13). This is a major principle of Black feminism, that racism and sexism cannot be fought with the single-axis framework. An acknowledgment of intersectionality is fundamental to the destruction of these interwoven forms of oppression. One response to this issue of white feminism’s exclusion of Black woman can be seen in womanism.

Womanism

Womanism, a historically and culturally situated articulation of Black feminism, was introduced by Alice Walker in her 1983 collection of prose *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*. The book opens with a definition of womanism as a “black feminist or feminist of color,” and also explores other meanings of the word that speak specifically to African American women’s experiences. Patricia Hill Collins in her essay, “What’s in a Name?: Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond” discusses how womanism is “rooted in black women’s concrete history of racial and gender oppression” (10). Womanism, then, clearly counters the lack of intersectionality and the single-axis focus on gender in white feminism. Collins continues, “Walker suggests that black women’s concrete history fosters a womanist worldview accessible primarily and perhaps exclusively to black women” (10). Womanism speaks to the continued absence and the silencing of Black women in the feminist movement by centering African American women’s experiences, therefore creating a space by and for only them. In her definition, Walker speaks to and about girls who are “womanish” which she takes from the Southern “black folk expression of mothers to female children,” “You acting womanish”

Yet, many white women, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton (a major leader of the women’s suffrage), feared that Black men would get to vote before white women, and only acknowledged Black women as a last resort to getting suffrage for women.

(Walker xi). Collins further explains, “Womanish girls acted in courageous, and willful ways, attributes that freed them from the conventions long limiting white women” (10). Again, “Walker constructs black women’s experiences in opposition to those of white women” and does so by focusing explicitly on an experience that cannot be understood or recognized by non-Black women. Collins does, to some extent, critique this, as she claims that Walker contradicts herself in her disclaimer that womanists are “traditionally universalist” (qtd. in Collins 10) while also implying that “black women are somehow superior to white women because of this black folk tradition” (Collins 10). This has led to some considering womanism to be opposed to feminism—that womanism is for Black women and feminism is for white women, despite Walker’s insistence of womanism’s universalism. But the term also creates a movement and identification for Black women, something that had been vehemently denied to them by the feminist movement. Rather than creating a dichotomy where Black women are superior to white women, it could be seen that Walker creates a unique space for Black women that speaks to and accounts for the multiple axes of oppression that they face. For, while Collins does partially critique Walker’s definition of womanism, she also claims that “By both grounding womanism in the concrete experiences of African-American women and generalizing about the potential for realizing a humanist vision of community via the experiences of African American women, Walker depicts the potential for oppressed people to possess a moral vision and standpoint on society that grows from their situation of oppression” (11-12).¹² One important fact about

¹² Collins goes on to describe one fault of womanism is its focus on idealism, something that has also come into discussion about utopia, as discussed previously. Collins claims, “Identifying the liberatory *potential* with black women’s communities that emerges from concrete, historical experiences remains quite different from claiming that black women have already *arrived* at this ideal” (11). This might be one reason why Collins theorizes more with Black feminism, as it is implied that Black feminism is more aligned with actionable possibility. Still, it is important to note that the danger here, according to Collins, is likely that the ideal word of womanist has not yet been achieved, and therefore work still needs to continue. Perhaps a Black feminist utopia would imagine such a world where womanism has ‘arrived,’ but where the work is always continuing towards the ideal.

womanism, Black feminism, and feminism in general for African American women is that it is complicated. A reason for this is that the history of Black women and feminism itself is complicated, as detailed by the outright exclusion of Black women from mainstream feminist movements, as well as Black women's chosen absence in these movements because these feminists were often engaged in battles that did not speak to the lived realities of Black women.

Black feminism

Collins details, too, the emergence of Black feminism¹³, speaking to the tradition of feminism and how “using the term ‘black feminism’ positions African American women to examine how the particular constellation of issues affecting black women in the United States are part of issues of women’s emancipation struggles globally” (13). In this way, Black feminism speaks to Black women’s lived experiences, but also goes beyond, to encompass an intersectional feminism that attempts to combat all axes of oppression—sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, and more. In her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins also explains how Black feminism is a standpoint theory, meaning that “U.S. Black feminist thought reflects the standpoint of its creators” (269). Black feminism is grounded in Black women’s experiences and the multiplicity of these experiences. Collins states that, “Experience as a criterion of meaning with practical images as its symbolic vehicles is a fundamental epistemological tenet of African-American thought systems” as illustrated by Sojourner Truth’s infamous speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?” where she invokes “examples from her own life to symbolize new meanings... deconstruct[ing] the prevailing notions of womanhood” (Collins,

¹³ Collins also describes major issues with Black feminism in her essay, “Whats in a Name?: Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond,” including the pressure for Black women to support white women in fostering their anti-racism in order to gain access to certain networks and spaces, as well as homophobia in the Black feminist movement, and the perception of separatism as a tenet of Black feminism. The latter of these will be discussed in my deliberation of Black feminist utopianism.

Black Feminist Thought 276). Even the term Black feminism speaks to its function as a standpoint theory, for it “disrupts the racism inherent in presenting feminism as a for-whites-only ideology and political movement” (Collins, “What’s in a Name?” 13). The phrase “Black feminism” highlights how *feminism* excludes Black women, and thus simultaneously elucidates how the Black feminist movement is constructed through Black women’s experiences. According to Collins, “inserting the adjective ‘black’ challenges the assumed whiteness of feminism and disrupts the false universal of this term for both white and black women” (“What’s in a Name?” 13). The same can be said for when Black feminism is applied to narrower topics of study—such as Black feminist literature, or, perhaps, the Black feminist utopia. In any case, Black women writers and thinkers like Patricia Hill Collins and Alice Walker, as well as bell hooks, Barbara Smith, Alice Walker, Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, the Combahee River Collective, Audre Lorde, and many more made a space for Black women and brought upon the emergence of intersectional Black feminism and womanism—allowing Black women to be seen where they were not seen before.¹⁴

Black feminism and literature

In the 1977 piece *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*, Barbara Smith discusses how the lack of a Black feminist movement led to the absence of Black women’s voices in literature, an ideology that can be still applied to absence of Black women’s work in utopian literary studies today. Smith explains how the intersectional oppression that Black women face has largely been unacknowledged and unaddressed in literary scholarship, claiming that “All segments of the

¹⁴ The work of Black women and Black feminism did not just start with these thinkers in the 1970s, but they did become more widely recognized with these writers, theorists, and activists. As mentioned in footnote 11, Ula Taylor outlines the incredible and significant work of African American women beginning from abolition and moving into the late 20th century, when Patricia Hill Collins explains that Black women “broke silence” and “developed a ‘voice’” (“What’s in a Name?” 9)

literary world... do not know, or at least act as if they do not know, that Black women writers and Black lesbian writers exist” (Smith). She claims that this is specifically an issue for “ostensible feminists and acknowledged lesbians” who “have been so blinded to the implications of any womanhood that is not white womanhood that they have yet to struggle with the deep racism in themselves that is the source of this blindness” (Smith). In this discussion of the exclusion and absence of Black women in literature and literary studies, Smith calls upon the Black feminist movement (or lack thereof) as one reason for this invisibility of Black women writers. She claims:

In speaking about the current situation of Black women writers, it is important to remember that the existence of a feminist movement was an essential pre-condition to the growth of feminist literature, criticism and women’s studies, which focused at the beginning almost entirely upon investigations of literature. The fact that a parallel Black feminist movement has been much slower in evolving cannot help but have impact upon the situation of Black women writers and artists and explains in part why during this very same period we have been so ignored. (Smith)

The same could be said, then, for the lack of Black women’s voices in studies of utopian literature. It is arguable that there is now a “viable, autonomous Black feminist movement,” which Smith claims, coupled with “a redefinition of goals and strategies of the white feminist movement would lead to much needed change in the focus and content of what is now generally accepted as women’s culture” (Smith). Even still, utopian scholarship and studies has continued to ignore Black feminism and Black women’s voices, in spite of the fact that literary studies more broadly has progressed some from Smith’s original claim that, “When black women’s books are dealt with at all, it is usually in the context of Black literature which largely ignores the implications of sexual politics” (Smith). With writers like Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, Claudia Rankine, Ntzoke Shange, and so many more, scholarship around these authors includes discussion of the intersectional oppression faced specifically by Black women.

But the same cannot be said for utopian scholarship. One reason for this may be because utopian literary studies has not accounted for Black feminist thought and principles, particularly in terms of the idea of a “feminist utopia,” thus rendering potential Black feminist utopias invisible.

III. INTRODUCING BLACK FEMINIST UTOPIANISM

To render these Black feminist utopias more visible and acknowledge Black feminist utopian fiction within the field of utopian studies, we must configure utopianism with Black feminist theory and principles in mind. As Crenshaw claims in her articulation of intersectionality, in order to stop the “marginalization of Black women,” “feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse” must “embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women” and in order to do this, “the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating ‘women’s experience’ or ‘the Black experience’ into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast” (140). This same approach can be applied to feminist utopianism and the marginalization of Black women in these supposedly utopian worlds. In order to include Black women’s voices into utopian studies, scholarship must be reconfigured to include theories and stories which center Black women’s lived experiences, thus allowing for the study of Black feminist utopianism. One way to do this is to look at the ways in which a Black feminist utopia may *not* look the same as a ‘standard’ feminist utopia, and therefore why some African American women’s literature may not be read as utopian literature, even if it has elements of utopianism.

One major aspect of a Black feminist utopia that is certainly not included in 20th century formations of feminist utopianism is that it would be intersectional. The importance of intersectionality in addressing multiple axes of oppression and discrimination has already been established, but for emphasis in its connection to literature and utopian literature, Barbara Smith explains that, “A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the

works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity” (Smith). Black feminist utopias must not only address but embody these ‘interlocking’ factors of gender, race, and class. In doing so, it should be reiterated that there is no singular Black women’s experience. While Black women face similar kinds of intersectional oppression—as Smith indicated, the interlocking factors of gender, race, class, and more—not all Black women have the same experience. According to Collins in her discussion of Black women’s standpoint, “no homogenous Black *woman’s* standpoint exists. There is no essential or archetypal Black woman whose experiences stand as normal, normative, and thereby authentic... Instead, it may be more accurate to say that a Black *women’s* collective standpoint does exist” (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 32). A Black feminist utopia, then, would likely seek to embody such a collective standpoint, where the multiplicity of Black *women’s* experiences must be accounted for. Of course, Black feminist utopias can still be flawed, even if intersectional. No place can truly account for every single experience, even in the attempt to work towards a collective standpoint. But there are also many different kinds of Black feminist utopias that exist. Much like there is no singular Black women’s experience, there, too, is no singular Black feminist utopia. Still, the many different articulations of Black feminist utopianism would become more visible within utopian studies if some basic tenets of Black feminism and womanism were accounted for along with more traditional characteristics of feminist utopianism.

Perhaps the greatest difference between a Black feminist utopia and a non-Black feminist utopia is the aspect of separatism. Feminist utopias on the 20th century were largely are centered in separatism; as described earlier, in many of these fictional worlds, the only possibility of utopia is through separating women away from men so that they can thrive in a theoretically patriarchy-free environment. But the same likely cannot be said for a Black feminist utopia.

Alice Walker brings light to how this difference exists outside of literary spaces as well, in her story “Breaking Chains and Encouraging Life,” where she details how a white woman claims, “I would love to work with black women and third-world women, but I’m a separatist... black and third-world women always seem connected to some man” (279). Separatism has long divided radical white feminists from Black feminists, as many radical white feminists have seen separatism as the only solution to patriarchy, thus leading them to restrict Black women from the feminist movement because they would not commit to separatism as an ideal. Separatism, according to many Black women who theorize or write about Black feminism and womanism, is exclusionary in itself and an impossibility for many women who feel that such a mode of living and thinking is not feasible, as participating in separatism would also mean abandoning a part of their community. The Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist lesbian organization that was active primarily in the late 1970s, explained the issue of separatism in their statement on Black feminism, claiming that they “reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. It leaves out far too much and far too many people, particularly black men, women, and children” (32). For Black women, who, as Walker states in her definition of womanism, are “Committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female,” community of all, including Black women, men, and children, is a vital aspect of their lived realities (xi). There is a cultural emphasis here on the familial, particularly because of the histories surrounding African American families and communities through enslavement and systemic racism. For Black women, separatism would mean willingly severing oneself from one’s community, which would be, as Walker emphasizes, detrimental to the ‘survival and wholeness’ of African Americans and their communal culture. And Alice Walker mentions separatism outright, stating that a womanist is “Not a separatist, except periodically, for health”

(xi). To not be separatist ‘except periodically, for health,’ speaks to the complicated feelings of connecting Black feminism, and the Black feminist utopia, with separatism. Black women have faced violence and sexism from men, both non-Black and Black. bell hooks explains how sexism and patriarchy still exist and operate for Black men when she claims that “black men can be victimized by racism but at the same time act as sexist oppressors of black women,” and how “people are absolutely unwilling to admit the damaging effects of racism on black men neither prevents them from being sexist oppressors nor excuses or justifies their sexist oppression of black women” (88). In fact, Black women’s literature often centers on the violence and oppression that Black women face at the hands of Black men and their sexism¹⁵. But bell hooks also explores how this sexism is *learned*, and that it is a consequence of socialization, for “at very young ages male children are socialized to regard females as their enemy and as a threat to their masculine status and power—a threat, however, they can conquer through violence” (102). The Combahee River Collective maintains the same understanding, positing that they “have a great deal of criticism and loathing for what men have been socialized to be in this society: what they support, how they act, and how they oppress” but that to believe this is inherent in their “biological maleness,” that such sexism “makes them what they are” is a “misguided notion” (32). This is not to deny the sexism that Black women face, of course, as often this socialization turns into a very real forms of violence and aggression, as hooks claims, “As they [male children] grow older they learn that aggression toward women lessens their anxiety and fear that their masculine power will be usurped” (107). According to Leonard Schein, as cited in bell hooks, men must acknowledge this hatred they are conditioned to in order to move beyond it,

¹⁵ Such works include *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf* by Ntozake Shange, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, and more. There has also been much scholarship on this topic, including Heather Duerre Humann’s book *Domestic Abuse in the Novels of African American Women: A Critical Study*.

claiming that men must “take responsibility for [their] personal hatred” or they “will not be able to seriously explore [their] emotionality nor treat women as equal human beings” (hooks 107). For bell hooks, this acknowledgment and de-socialization of sexism is contingent upon true freedom for Black men, as she claims that “There can be no freedom for black men as long as they advocate for subjugation of black women” (117). Separatism will not solve the issue of Black men’s sexism and violence against Black women. Instead, there must be opportunities and space to unlearn such sexism. And while there should also be space for Black women to, as Walker says, be separatists ‘periodically, for health,’ this is not a permanent solution, as separatism would call for Black women denying their racial community. The Combahee River Collective discusses this as well, claiming that “Our situation as black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with black men against racism, while we also struggle with black men about sexism” (32). Calls for separatism, or the automatic association some make with the terms feminism and separatism, is what keeps some Black women from identifying with feminism altogether. Such a mode of thinking and living, then, would not be applicable in a Black feminist utopia, which centers on Black women’s lives and experiences, and therefore inherently also includes Black men and their experiences.¹⁶ This might be one reason why Black feminist utopianism is not addressed by scholars, as compared to feminist utopias—if the major ways in which feminist utopias distinguish themselves from traditional utopias is through its separatism, then there is not a space in such utopianism for non-separatist Black feminists and womanists.

¹⁶ The inability for a Black feminist utopia to be separatist is particularly relevant when considering societal violence against Black men, which will be explored more in my analysis of Willow Springs in Naylor’s *Mama Day*.

Another common characteristic of non-Black feminist utopias, often because of its separatism, is that women are major leaders of the public sphere, and men, if present, are more often seen in the private sphere. This is usually seen as a positive feature as the absence of men allows women in these utopian settings to advance in their abilities and show their true potential, unhindered by patriarchal restrictions. This concept is dependent on a separate spheres ideology, a prevalent discourse in 2nd wave feminism that argued against women's limited position in the home¹⁷. But, separate spheres ideology doesn't necessarily account for Black women's experiences, something that Crenshaw points out in her discussion of feminist legal thought's use of this rhetoric. She describes "separate spheres literature" as "an example of how some feminist theories are narrowly constructed around white women's experiences" and how "Feminists have attempted to expose and dismantle separate spheres ideology by identifying and criticizing the stereotypes that traditionally have justified the disparate societal roles assigned to men and women" (155). But these 'traditional roles' do not encompass African American experiences, where, as Crenshaw states, societally "Black men are not viewed as powerful, nor are Black women seen as passive" (155). In fact, "Black women have traditionally worked outside of the home in numbers far exceeding the labor participation of white women" and therefore they are not included in separate spheres ideology¹⁸. Of course, this is not to say that they are not impacted by patriarchy, for "the very fact that Black women must work conflicts with norms that women should not, often creating personal, emotional, and relationship problems in Black women's lives" (156). As a result, "Black women are burdened not only because they often have

¹⁷ Betty Freidan was a principal figure in arguing that women's place in the home kept them reliant on their husbands, seen in her book *The Feminine Mystique*.

¹⁸ It is important to note that much of the Black women's labor, historically, has been domestic work, which is discussed extensively in Collins's *Black Feminist Thought*. Therefore, Black women are simultaneously in the public sphere but do the work of the private sphere.

to take on responsibilities that are not traditionally feminine but, moreover, their assumption of these roles is sometimes interpreted within the Black community as either Black women's failure to live up to such norms or as another manifestation of racism's scourge upon the Black community” (156). Black women are, arguably, not given the freedom to choose between the public and private sphere, and instead, the public sphere is foisted upon them. But they do not gain any power through their labor for their place in the public sphere becomes yet another aspect of racism and sexism that they must contend with—Black women are seen as a ‘failure’ for not being traditionally feminine, therefore battling with the ‘cult of true womanhood’ while they are simultaneously faced with white feminism’s preoccupation with separate spheres ideology. In a utopia where women, who are often unracialized and therefore assumed to be white, flourish and succeed in the public sphere, because they are finally given the freedom to work, where do Black women, who have been forced to labor in the public sphere, fit in?

While Black women are not recognized or seen in feminist utopian projects, for the reasons outlined above and more, it is still possible to find Black feminist utopias that embody and conceptualize a space created for and by Black women. To the uncritical eye a Black feminist utopia may seem to be absent, simply because it does not look similar to feminist utopian formations, but with Black feminist thought and these considerations in mind, it is possible to recognize and value Black feminist utopias, even if they have not been seen as such before. This kind of analysis has been applied before towards Black utopias, such as in the recent book *Black Utopia* (2019) by Alex Zamalin which seeks to examine and map a Black utopian tradition through an analysis of works by W. E. B. Du Bois, George S. Schuyler, Richard Wright, Sun Ra, and more. *Black Utopia* is unique in its kind, for there have been few other scholarly considerations of Black utopianism. Dohra Ahmad, in her book *Landscapes of Hope:*

Anti-Colonial Utopianism in America reads Du Bois's *Dark Princess* as a literary utopia, and in doing so, as Mark A. Tabone cites, she proves how Du Bois's text allows for "'world-altering' utopian visions" that "can facilitate 'intellectual decolonization' through radical, defamiliarizing shifts in perspective" and therefore "remap the 'horizons of possibility' for sociopolitical transformation in ways that liberate the 'possible' from the constraints of the 'actual'" (Tabone 131). Ahmad articulates the possibilities of Black utopian visions for decolonization and liberation, something that Zamalin also expresses when he claims that "combining black utopia's unforeseen transformative possibilities with an awareness of its limitations can invigorate contemporary political thinking" (Zamalin 2). Both scholars pick up on the *possibilities* of Black utopia to create and envision change, despite its potential shortcomings. While the same kind of deliberation and attention has not yet been given to Black feminist utopian fictions, with a Black feminist theoretical framework we can better see and analyze these utopian projects, even if they have not been analyzed as such before. A Black feminist utopia, in centering Black women's voices and livelihoods, would inhabit a 'social dreaming'¹⁹ that would potentially reveal 'a better way of being,'²⁰ but one that truly takes into account issues of race *and* gender, as well as other intersections of oppression. In this thesis, I argue that one such iteration of a Black feminist utopia is articulated through the island of Willow Springs in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*.

¹⁹ Lyman Tower Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited."

²⁰ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*.

IV. *MAMA DAY'S* WILLOW SPRINGS AS A BLACK FEMINIST UTOPIA

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, set in the fictional island of Willow Springs, centers on the Day family, primarily Miranda Day ("Mama Day"), her sister Abigail Day, and Abigail's granddaughter Ophelia "Cocoa" Day, all descendants of the legendary Sapphira Wade, the conjure woman who created Willow Springs. While some of the novel concentrates on Cocoa and her relationship with George Andrews, much of *Mama Day* is focused on Willow Springs and its residents. As a result, the novel is a look into the culture and tradition of the Willow Springs islanders, with the island's utopian elements setting it apart from the "outside" world.

Mama Day was published in 1988, just a decade after many popular feminist utopian novels were also published, such as Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1979). It could be said, then, that Naylor's book came out at a time when feminist utopianism was very much prevalent within the discourse of utopian studies. In spite of the prominence of feminist utopianism at the time of publication, though, and characteristics of utopianism within *Mama Day*, which will be analyzed throughout this thesis, the novel has not received much scholarly attention as a utopian novel and in particular as a Black feminist utopian work. Jane Duran writes that the novel is "worthy of extensive commentary" as an "exemplary work of the contemporary Black literary canon" (1). I agree, but also believe that while *Mama Day* may have received attention as a profoundly important work within African American women's fiction more generally, it has not received the same amount of attention as a utopian work. This is not to say that the potential for seeing utopianism within *Mama Day* has been completely overlooked, for

there has been one article that details *Mama Day's* utopian possibilities. In their article “Reading Heterotopia as a Site of Resistance in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988),” Soumia Bentahar and Noureddine Guerroudj read *Mama Day* as a heterotopia, working from the Foucauldian term which entails a world that is ‘other,’ set within a space that both mirrors and simultaneously subverts the world ‘opposite’ of it. In a sense, heterotopia is a world within a world that disrupts the institutions that exist outside of the inner, more ‘utopian’ space. Bentahar and Guerroudj’s discussion of Naylor’s work through the lens of heterotopia contributes a compelling analysis of the novel’s utopian characteristics to the field of utopian studies. Yet their work is the only article published so far discussing *Mama Day's* utopian characteristics, and they have only just touched the surface of the utopian potential in Willow Springs, for they fail to consider the intersectional experiences that are so central to *Mama Day*.²¹ Their analysis of the novel as a heterotopia concentrates primarily on race, alluding to the subversive qualities of Willow Springs as race-centered. While their scholarship is important, it is missing the key aspect of Willow Springs’s intersectionality and its portrayal of issues and experiences pertaining to both race and gender. Therefore, it is valuable to read *Mama Day's* Willow Springs specifically as a literary Black feminist utopia, taking into consideration the centering of Black women’s experiences in the novel and the potential of Willow Springs as offering a ‘better way of being’ for Black

²¹ Bentahar and Guerroudj read Willow Springs as a “counter-site”, subversive in the ways in which the Black folks on the island complicate issues of gender and race. Their analysis of the island is incredibly thought-provoking and useful in considering the novel’s setting as utopian, or as they claim, heterotopian, particularly through its geography as an “all-black-owned space” which then becomes a “site of resistance against mainstream cultural domination” (102). The authors also allude to Willow Springs’s liminality, something that is a major focus in my own argument of its place as a Black feminist utopia. Overall, Bentahar and Guerroudj’s argument that “Naylor creates an autonomous black community” in Willow Springs that disrupts dominant discourses of race through its “imaginative articulation of spaces of a different order” is profound scholarship, unique in its discussion of the novel’s utopian possibilities. But, my own thesis seeks specifically read the novel as a Black feminist utopia, rather than a heterotopia, because there has been a lack of significant centering of Black feminism and its theories in literature, especially utopian literature. While I may make similar points to Bentahar and Guerroudj, particularly in the resistant possibilities of Willow Springs, I find that it is valuable to recognize the island’s Black feminist possibilities and its consequential futurity as a result of the centering of Black women’s experiences and lived realities.

women and, consequently, all inhabitants of the island through its Black feminist utopian possibilities. By seeing *Mama Day* and the island of Willow Springs as a Black feminist utopia, we can widen utopian scholarship to include Black feminist utopian fictions, which have thus far been rendered invisible and overshadowed by articulations of and scholarship on feminist utopias.²²

In order to read *Mama Day*'s Willow Springs as a Black feminist utopia, we must first begin to understand the specific features of literary Black feminist utopianism and how they are positioned with and against feminist utopian elements. While I have mentioned previously that separatism is a primary difference between the (non-Black) feminist utopia and the Black feminist utopia, there are additional major characteristics that work to define literary Black feminist utopias, particularly in connection to Black feminist theory and culture. Some elements of a literary Black feminist utopia may include, but are not limited to:

1. An emphasis on the importance of place and home, perhaps one that is liminal, that is created against systems of oppression.
2. A connection to African and/or African American folk traditions, either through the incorporation of Africanist religions, rituals, matrilineality, Black female divinity, and/or an affinity with nature.
3. A focus on the complex lived experiences of Black women and their communal spaces, within which the presence of Black men and children are central.
4. Narratives grounded in Black feminism and womanism, with emphasis on intersectionality.

²² Similar to how Black women were rendered invisible by the feminist movement, as discussed earlier in this thesis.

5. The abandonment, renunciation, and/or replacement of Western structures or ideologies that do not support or actively harm African American communities.

While these are not the only elements of Black feminist utopianism, and some Black feminist utopias may not include all of these characteristics, they are possible criteria for analyzing works as Black feminist utopian fictions. For example, utopias are often considered to be physical locations or places, and any Black feminist utopian home or place would likely be fully intersectional and created against systemic oppression, such as sexism or racism. A connection to African and African American folk traditions, affinity with nature, or focus on Black female divinity narratives might be present in a Black feminist utopia because those traditions would affirm an Africanist past and reclaim customs that were stripped away through the institution of slavery. Black female divinity narratives might also be present because of their centering of Black women's experiences, thus challenging Western notions of God and religion. And these narratives might also challenge other Western structures, such as law enforcement or the prison industrial complex, which actively harm African American communities. Finally, because Black feminist utopias are intersectional, they would focus on Black women's lived experiences, which often also encompass the experiences of their community, including Black men and children.

Through these characteristics we might begin to see Black feminist utopianism even where it has not been analyzed as such before. For example, the film *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash, contains many of these elements, particularly in the incorporation of Yoruba traditions, the centering of Black women's lived experiences, and the importance of home for the Gullah community in coastal South Carolina. One might be able to read a kind of Black feminist utopianism into this communal, matrilineal, and liminal space that becomes

almost ethereal through the film's cinematography. Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow is Enuf* also centers Black women's lived experiences, particularly in its discussion of sexist and racist oppression through the stories of seven African American women. Some sections of the choreopoem focus on aspects of inner divinity, such as in "a laying of hands," when the lady in red claims, "i found god in myself / & i loved her/i loved her fiercely" (Shange 87). And, again, the choreopoem speaks specifically to the intersectional experience of being a Black woman, such as in the illustrious quote when the lady in yellow says, "bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical / dilemma / i haven't conquered yet" (Shange 59). In *For Colored Girls*, Shange creates a space by and for Black women to discuss the complexities of being Black women, and thus one could argue that the space created within the text, where these women can speak freely of their experiences, becomes a Black feminist utopian world. While these, and I am sure many other texts, prove to be compelling articulations of Black feminist utopianism, I am focusing my attention in this thesis on Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*.

Mama Day's illustration of African folk tradition and matrilineality, as well as its portrayal of Willow Springs as a liminal home are exemplary aspects of its Black feminist utopianism. Through her depiction of conjure, Naylor creates a mysticism within Willow Springs that makes it a space unlike any other, with power that is uniquely situated in the hands of Black women. As a result, Black women's complex experiences are centered in the novel. Through its liminality, the island exhibits characteristics of a utopian enclave that is situated away from the systemic oppression of the mainland, and yet Willow Springs is still very much grounded in realism, affected by certain aspects of mainland culture with which they must contend. But, in spite of any tragedy or disaster, Willow Springs endures as a Black feminist utopia, continuing

the legacy of the “maternal ancestor” (Yavaş 248) Sapphira Wade. The island survives as a Black-owned, Black women-centered, intersectional space that illustrates a vision of a “better way of being” (Levitas 5).

A. The Women of *Mama Day*: Matrilineal Connections to Utopia

One essential aspect in which Naylor's *Mama Day* articulates Black feminist utopianism is in its centering of Black women's lived experiences in Willow Springs, the primary setting of the novel. The novel's narrative is grounded specifically in the realities of the Black women of the island, with Mama Day, Abigail, and Cocoa being at the forefront as the direct descendants of the legendary Sapphira Wade, the enslaved woman who conjured her way into the deed of the island and thus created Willow Springs as a Black feminist utopia. With a pronounced focus on maternal ancestry, as well as through allusions to these women as goddess-like figures and a nuanced portrayal of the conjure practice, Naylor creates a space in Willow Springs that is uniquely utopian through a culture that is shaped by the women of the novel, primarily Sapphira Wade and Mama Day, all of which is unveiled to readers in a story that is primarily told from the perspectives and through the voices of the Willow Springs island women themselves.

Sapphira Wade, "a true conjure woman," (Naylor 3) is a constant presence in the novel. She is the creator of Willow Springs, for it only exists as it does in the novel through Sapphira's resistant acts. In this way, she is both the 'mother' of the island, and, as creator, the deity or goddess-figure of the islanders. Sapphira represents the matrilineal beginnings of Willow Springs and the Day family, and in many ways, she establishes the island as a Black feminist utopia. Before the narrative of *Mama Day* even begins, we are alerted to the ancestral and matrilineal presence of Sapphira through the family tree, which serves as a kind of visual epigraph for the novel. "Sapphira Wade b. 1779" (Naylor 1) is the sole figure at the top of the family tree, and thus is the "maternal ancestor" of the Day family (Yavaş 248). In the second "epigraph," we see

the “Conditions of Sale” for Sapphira, where she has been sold on “Tuesday, 3rd Day of August, 1819” to “Mister Bascombe Wade of Willow Springs” (Naylor 2). This “Conditions of Sale” is particularly interesting because it reveals Sapphira’s personality and her presence as a conjure woman. She has a “bilious nature, having resisted under reasonable chastisement the performance of field or domestic work” and she creates “suspicions of delving in witchcraft” (Naylor 2). As we are first introduced to Sapphira, she is seen as somewhat otherworldly and defiant, perhaps even ‘womanish.’ She is a character in her own right in the novel, for even if she is not necessarily physically in contemporary Willow Springs, her presence is clear from the very beginning and continues throughout as we learn more of the island and the Day family. While we learn that she was enslaved and sold to Bascombe Wade, first and foremost she is positioned as a ‘maternal ancestor’ and the beginning of the family line for the Days through the family tree, and only second is she a “slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words” (Naylor 3). Sapphira establishes Willow Springs as a Black feminist utopia through her legendary presence as the ‘maternal ancestor,’ with the reclaiming of her body and self through the acquisition of Willow Springs, in the supposed murder of Bascombe Wade.

When we are first introduced to Sapphira Wade and Willow Springs, on the first page of *Mama Day*’s narrative, we find that the story of how Sapphira became owner of the island’s deed is somewhat inconclusive, but it ultimately ends in the people of Willow Springs gaining communal ownership of the land. As Naylor writes:

And somehow, some way, it happened in 1823: she smothered Bascombe Wade in his very bed and lived to tell the story for a thousand days. 1823: married Bascombe Wade, bore him seven sons in just a thousand days, to put a dagger through his kidney and escape the hangman’s noose, laughing in a burst of flames. 1823: persuaded Bascombe Wade in a thousand days to deed all his slaves every inch of land in Willow Springs, poisoned him for his trouble, to go on and bear seven sons—by person or persons unknown. Mixing it all together and keeping everything that done shifted down through the holes of time, you end up with the death of Bascombe Wade (there’s his tombstone

right out by Chevy's pass), the deeds to our land (all marked back to the very year), and seven sons. (Naylor 3)

In this passage we learn that the creation of Willow Springs as a Black feminist utopia was possible only through Sapphira's murder of Bascombe Wade—even though the exact details of the act are unclear. Scholars Vijayalakshmi and Padmavathi explain that with this “act of murder...the island of Willow Springs patriarchy gets displaced with matriarchy” (Vijayalakshmi and Padmavathi). The ‘matriarchal’ Black feminist utopia begins with Sapphira's violent reclaiming of her body and the bodies of other enslaved people, as well as her obtaining of Willow Springs's deed and what the narrator calls, rightfully so, “our land.” The possession is clear here—in *Mama Day*, Willow Springs is undeniably the land of its people, and this is an incredible statement considering the history of the enslavement that is alluded to at the beginning of the novel. Nesrin Yavaş in the article “Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*: Magical realism as the site of black female agency and power” connects the story of Sapphira Wade to the African American legend of Igbo Landing, proving how Sapphira's reclamation is an act of power steeped in African American history and folklore. She discusses how the legend describes the Sea Islands (what most scholars pinpoint as Willow Springs's geographical location) as “sites where thousands of slaves imported from Africa” and how “Igbo landing... was one of those small Sea Islands, off the coast of Charleston, where, in 1858, the American slave ship *The Wanderer* arrived with a cargo of slaves” but that “once the slaves realized that this was to be their fate in the New World they walked across the ocean back to Africa, back to their native land” (Yavaş 248). Yavaş parallels this legend with that of Sapphira Wade, who “killed her master Bascombe Wade... forced him to deed the whole land to his slaves, and returned back to Africa walking across the ocean” (Yavaş 248). Naylor writes from this African American folklore tradition, then, of empowering those who were enslaved through acts of resistance, and

in this novel one such act is embodied in the creation of Willow Springs as a Black feminist utopia. In the legend depicted by Naylor, Sapphira does not simply leave the enslaved people of Willow Springs—instead she makes them the owners of the land and establishes the island as a utopian haven for its people. With these origins, Naylor creates a Black feminist utopia by first centering the Black experience, therefore rooting her utopia in its significance of race and racial oppression. She acknowledges the rife history of enslavement and creates a utopia through an experience that is particular to African Americans, with the power of this creation laid specifically in the hands of Sapphira Wade. This is not a story, like so many other utopias, where a group of people set the intention of creating a utopia. If that were the case, they would likely fail like so many literary utopias do, for they were not truly inclusive in their utopianism.²³ Instead, Willow Springs is created from an enslaved woman’s reclaiming of power, a revolutionary act that is possible through Sapphira’s conjure abilities. The island does not exist out of some desire for a better world for a selfish few, but rather the *need* for a better world for those who were enslaved and deserved freedom not found elsewhere. Sapphira, and Naylor as author, allows Willow Springs to be claimed by the people who live and work in the land, rather than by a white enslaver’s possession of their bodies and their land. For the sons she bore, though they were “born in slavery time... they lived as free men ‘cause their mama willed it so” (Naylor 151). In Willow Springs, she creates a place of freedom for her descendants, allowing them an autonomy that would have been inconceivable if not for her. The legend of Sapphira Wade, then, is a powerful story of reclamation, rooted in a Black woman’s resilience against the enslavement of her people.

²³ As mentioned earlier, these utopian configurations rendered many invisible, including people of color. One example of utopianism that fails through its exclusionary characteristics and lack of intersectionality could be seen in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*, though this will not be explored in-depth in this thesis.

This resilience becomes characteristic of the Willow Springs islanders as a whole, as Sapphira's defiance and power is intrinsic to the utopian community she created. Sapphira, despite being the 'maternal ancestor' of Willow Springs, is not truly known by its residents—much like the story of Igbo Landing, she is a legend, but the lore surrounding her is ingrained into the culture and everyday lives of its people. Maxine L. Montgomery in "Finding Peace in the Middle: Authority, Resistance, and the Legend of Sapphira Wade" claims that the legend of Sapphira "subverts predetermined meaning encoded in institutionalized discourse... the master narrative of white, patriarchal dominance" (154). Much of this subversion is through, as Montgomery further describes, the privileging of "cultural memory as a site of resistance of colonial rule" (154). Sapphira's presence is maintained through the memories, culture, and language of the Willow Springs islanders, with one such instance being the linguistic mark of "18 & 23" (Naylor 4). As we know from the omniscient island voice, Sapphira killed Bascombe Wade and gained the deed to Willow Springs in 1823, and this year becomes a commonly spoken colloquial term for residents of the island. 18 & 23 can mean many things, as Naylor writes:

...little dark girls, hair all braided up with colored twine, got their '18 & 23's coming down' when they lean too long over the back yard fences, laughing at the antics of little dark boys who got the nerve to be 'breathing 18 & 23' with mother's milk still on their tongues... Yes, the *name* Sapphira Wade is never breathed out of a single mouth in Willow Springs. (Naylor 4)

But even though 'the *name* Sapphira Wade' is never mentioned, or perhaps even known to the islanders, 18 & 23, the year that transformed Willow Springs into the land of its people, is a constant presence in the lives of those people, and so is Sapphira Wade. "18 & 23" is rooted in the specific culture and understanding of Willow Springs, something that speaks to Sapphira's own resilience and livelihood as a Black woman. As stated later when Reema's son, a member of

Willow Springs who goes off to “one of them fancy colleges mainside,” questions the meaning of 18 & 23, the narrator wonders, “If the boy wanted to know what 18 & 23 meant, why didn’t he just ask?... He coulda asked Cloris about the curve in her spine that came from the planting season when that mule broke its leg, and she took up reins and kept pulling the plow with her own back” or “Winky woulda told him about the hot tar that took out the corner of her right eye the summer we only had seven days to rebuild the bridge so the few crops he had left after the storm could be gotten over before rot sat in” (Naylor 8). “18 & 23” is the resilience of the Willow Springs residents to overcome the adversity they face on the island, coupled with the acknowledgment that they are their own people and this land is theirs. It is the story of the beginning and continuation of their reclaimed power, and thus it is also a mark of their Black feminist utopianism. “18 & 23” is symbolic of “the legend of Sapphira Wade, though nobody here breathes her name” for as the narrator of the beginning of *Mama Day* states, “You done heard [the legend] the way we know it, sitting on our porches and shelling June peas, quieting the midnight cough of a baby, taking apart the engine of a car—you done heard it without a single living soul really saying a word” (Naylor 10). Sapphira Wade is felt and embodied through every person of Willow Springs and their “18 & 23’ing” (Naylor 5). She is an all-consuming, omniscient presence, and as Maxine L. Montgomery writes, “Viewing her is much like gazing at an object through a kaleidoscopic lens: she remains static but is seemingly ever changing, defying reductive attempts at naming, labeling, and hence, circumscription” (153). Sapphira Wade is simultaneously nowhere and everywhere in Willow Springs: her presence is constantly felt but never seen. Her legendary tale makes her a ‘maternal ancestor,’ but it also positions her as a ‘creator’ of Willow Springs’s utopianism, and thus her presence likens her, to some extent, to that of a deity.

Sapphira Wade, referred to by Miranda Day as “the great, grand Mother” and the “ancient mother of pure black” is also envisioned as a kind of goddess in the novel (Naylor 48). George alludes to this in his own narrative discussion of Sapphira, claiming to Cocoa, “you told me that woman had been your grandmother’s great-grandmother. But it was odd again the way you said it—she was the great, great, grand, Mother—as if you were listing the attributes of a goddess” (Naylor 218).²⁴ Sapphira’s notoriety as a goddess in the novel is undeniable from the beginning, and it is centered in her creation of Willow Springs as a Black feminist utopia. From the first epigraph of the family tree, we find that Sapphira bore seven children, for “‘God rested on the seventh day and so would she.’ Hence, the family’s last name” (Naylor 1). She is paralleled with God, seen almost as his counter or equal. This comparison, or perhaps even challenge, to God is reiterated in the story of the Willow Springs Candle Walk, which Montgomery explains is “a reworking of the Genesis story of the Creation” where “the island matriarch is pitted against God in a contest for power, authority, and influence” (156). The lore of Candle Walk mirrors the legend of Sapphira Wade and “18 & 23” in its fantastical nature, with Sapphira as the savior of her people. Naylor writes that:

The island got spit out from the mouth of God, and when it fell to the earth it brought along an army of stars. He tried to reach down and scoop them back up, and found Himself shaking hands with the greatest conjure woman on earth. ‘Leave ‘em here, Lord,’ she said. ‘I ain’t got nothing but these poor black hands to guide my people but I can lead on with the light’. (110)

In this version of Willow Springs’s creation, God may have physically created Willow Springs, as it is ‘spit out’ from His mouth, but Sapphira, the ‘greatest conjure woman on earth’ is the one who leads the people of Willow Springs, with the light of ‘an army of stars.’ Candle Walk is a

²⁴ Some scholars have attempted to find parallels between Sapphira and which specific African goddess she is likened to, such as David Cowart, who likens her to the West African goddess Nana Buruku (Cowart 451).

prominent cultural aspect of Willow Springs, setting it apart from mainland society and thus reifying the island's utopian nature. It becomes a tradition of the island, but its beginnings come from Sapphira Wade's legend, the "slave woman who *took* her freedom in 1823. Left behind seven sons and a dead master as she walked down the main road, candle held high to light her way to the east bluff over the ocean" (Naylor 111). The culture of Willow Springs and its people is centered in Sapphira and the reclamation of her people. As Montgomery states, "Sapphira not only reverses the balance of power between herself and a masculine deity, she turns the tables on a slaveholding aristocracy" (156). She claims status as the goddess of the land, paralleling God by taking the burden of 'guiding her people' with her 'poor black hands.'

Sapphira Wade has been deemed "goddess" and "Great Mother" by the people of Willow Springs, and in many ways these two terms are inherently connected. From the beginning, she is identified as the 'ancestral mother,' not only of the Days but of Willow Springs altogether. Montgomery mentions this in connection to the fraught history that enslaved women dealt with as mothers, claiming that her birthing, naming, and mothering of seven sons is "a subversive gesture targeted toward slaveholding aristocracy" and that her actions "lend credence to assertions that black women were not passive in the face of slaveholding aristocracy but actively opposed the white oppressor" (Montgomery 161). Her mothering is inherently connected to her positioning as a goddess, for she is the "Mother who began the Days" and created not only a family line, but a whole world through the community of Willow Springs (Naylor 262). She is creator of the Black feminist utopian space that is Willow Springs, and therefore holds the position of 'higher power' or as Thomas R. Frosch claims, "supernatural power" for she is a "a figure of both terror and reverence for the people of the island," much like

any deity (8). Sapphira, ancestral mother and goddess, is the figure that the islanders look up to and live their lives by, as they “lead on with the light” (Naylor 110).

Sapphira’s descendants, the primary figures of *Mama Day*, also hold similar powers and characteristics as goddess-figures, though these depictions are filtered by the everyday contemporary world of the utopian island. Miranda Day, affectionally known as “Mama Day,” the great-granddaughter of Sapphira Wade, radiates a similar mysticism and conjure ability as her ancestor. She also maintains the same sense of matrilineal connection, for she is called “Little Mama” by her sister Abigail in childhood and is “Everybody’s mama now” because of how many she has helped bring into the world as a midwife, in spite of not having any biological children of her own (Naylor 89). Before exploring Mama Day’s role in Willow Springs, which one could read as that of a ‘matriarch,’ much like Sapphira, it is important to distinguish how Miranda, and the ‘great, grand Mother’ Sapphira Wade, differ from the construction of the “Black matriarch.”

In *Black Feminist Thought* Patricia Hill Collins details the stereotypical “controlling images” that Black women are forced to contend with by society, one of which is that of the matriarch. Matriarchs are deemed the “‘bad’ Black mother” figures of the household, opposite to the mammy, who “represents the ‘good’ Black mother” (Collins 83). Matriarchs are typically characterized as “working mothers” who spent “too much time away from home” and “ostensibly could not properly supervise their childrens’ failure at school” (Collins 83). The Black matriarch figure is a harmful image that seeks to further restrict and oppress Black women and has real consequences for “African-American women who must work” who, as Collins explains are pressured “to be submissive mammies in one setting, then are stigmatized again as matriarchs for being strong figures in their own homes” (86).

While I have so far discussed Sapphira Wade and Miranda Day as “maternal” and “matrilineal,” I have avoided using the term “matriarchal” because of this tempestuous history, despite other scholars’ depictions of the Day family as a matriarchal one. Even so, both Sapphira and Mama Day can be seen as “matriarchs” in their own right, though they are matriarchs that subvert the controlling societal image of the term. Both figures are seen as thoroughly maternal, though not in a traditional sense; Miranda has not given birth to any children of her own, but she is seen as a mother figure to Cocoa and many others on the island—her nickname is “Mama” Day after all. In a sense, Naylor places the maternal power in the hands of the mothers themselves. Often, maternity is positioned alongside supernatural or conjure capabilities in the novel; to be a matriarch in *Mama Day* is to be the ‘mother’ of Willow Springs, to keep things balanced and healthy in the Black feminist utopian island. Instead of embodying the stereotypes of the matriarch—the Black mother who is a ‘failed mammy,’ hostile, and too focused on their work—the characters of *Mama Day* become powerful figures of the island. Miranda is “everybody’s mama” (Naylor 89) but she is not a matriarch that people fear; instead, she is the person that people go to for advice, healing, and support. She is a resilient, experienced, and knowledgeable, not submissive like the stereotypical mammy or resentful like the stereotypical matriarch. Naylor’s depiction of this matriarchal character, whose power goes beyond that of the mundane, challenges stereotypical depictions of maternity and instead places the power back into matriarchy.

One way that Sapphira and Miranda Day hold such transgressive matriarchal power in Willow Springs is in their positions as conjure women. The presence of conjure in the novel has been discussed widely by scholars, such as Christina G. Bucher, who claims that “Naylor puts conjure at the very center of the novel” (87). Conjure is crucial to not only the novel’s plot and

how it affects characters, like Cocoa and George, but it is also intrinsic to the formation of Willow Springs as a Black feminist utopia. Conjure and the work of Sapphira, Miranda Day, and others as conjure women is at the core of the matrilineality of Willow Springs. As Yomna Saber writes in “The Conjure Woman’s Poetics of Poisoning on Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*,” “Despite the existence of male conjurers, the conjure paradigm is largely matriarchal” (381). Most of the conjure in the novel is executed by women, with the exception being Dr. Buzzard, who is seen in opposition to Miranda and is presented almost as a “caricature” of conjure compared to Miranda’s skill and expertise (Tucker 178). Naylor validates conjure and its capabilities in the implementation of it by the women of the novel, where we see real results and consequences to its practice. In the Black feminist utopian setting of Willow Springs, conjure not only exists, it thrives. It is a consistent underlying presence in the island, stemming from a tradition with “deep roots in African American folklore” (Saber 376). *Because* Willow Springs is a Black feminist utopia, conjure is a core element of the island, for, as Trudier Harris claims, “African-American folklore is arguably the basis for most African-American literature” (Harris, *Fiction and Folklore* 2). Conjurers who have “symbolized African roots,” (Saber 377) are the creators of the mysticism that makes Willow Springs utopian by its very nature, for with conjure women, Naylor centers Black women’s experiences, bestowing upon them an exceptional power in this utopian island that is based within a specifically African tradition.

Zora Neale Hurston describes conjure and “hoodoo,” which “uses conjure to work ‘miracles,’” as a “folk religion” (Hurston qtd. in Pryse 11). Many see the conjure woman as a “folk figure” established within African American folklore and envisioned through a reclamation of African roots (Saber 376). Saber even details the importance of conjure for enslaved Africans, for whom “conjuring was important under conditions of slavery” and how those who were

enslaved “needed it to retain their African identities in the new world” (Saber 377) and thus cites Mbiti’s discussion of how “the universe populated by spirits and witches, by supernatural omens and signs, by charms and magic, by conjuring and healing” was one in which “slaves could understand and operate within” (Mbiti qtd. in Saber 377). Conjuring and its possibilities for empowerment are a significant aspect of African American folklore and thus African American women’s literature. In fact, Marjorie Pryse describes the use of conjure and hoodoo as a “source of power” for Zora Neale Hurston, who in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* “would be able to find within herself and invest in her female protagonist Janie with the ‘magic’ of authority that makes storytelling—oral or written form—possible” (Pryse 12). Conjure, then, is fundamental for some African American women’s storytelling, enacting within them a power that is specific to them, grounded in African American folk tradition. The same could be said for the conjure women of *Mama Day*, who utilize conjure to tell their stories and enact their power specifically within the Black feminist utopia of Willow Springs.

There are many different forms of conjure, some of which are shown through Naylor’s depiction of Willow Springs and its conjure women. Saber discusses how conjure comes “from two different realms: the realm of healing and that of spirituality, which could be positive or negative... through uncanny powers conjurers could contact and sometimes control invisible forces” (Saber 376). Much of these two “realms” of conjure are seen in Sapphira, Miranda Day, and Ruby, the most prominent conjure women of the novel. Lindsey Tucker, in the article “Recovering the Conjure Women: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*” describes how conjure “treat[s] three types of illnesses: (1) natural illnesses for which a knowledge of roots, herbs, barks, and teas is applied; (2) so-called occult, or spiritually connected, illnesses which required spell casting and charms; and (3) illnesses which include both personal and

collective calamities that are not the result of malevolent practices” (177-178). All of these conjure ‘treatments’ are depicted in Naylor’s novel, with Mama Day and Ruby at the forefront of these practices, particular the healing of ‘natural illnesses’ for the former and ‘so-called occult’ for the latter. But, for any discussion of conjure, it is important to note that these practices are occasionally misrecognized or misinterpreted in scholarship on the tradition. Often “unfavorable depictions” of conjure do not lie in reality, and in actuality conjure is much more complex (Saber 378). Tucker explains that scholars who are “faced with the task of defining conjure” end up “creat[ing] divisions which, while useful, tend to oversimplify the subject and almost always reflect an ethnocentric bias. To associate conjure with sorcery, witchcraft, or necromancy is to further align it with occult practices which in Western traditions have been perceived to be opposed to Christianity and are, therefore, the work of the devil” (177)²⁵. Naylor’s character Mama Day, though, “differs” according to Tucker, for “she appears as a careful representation of a figure often willfully misunderstood and undervalued in historical and ethnographic studies of conjurers... In such texts we often find figures who are sometimes sinister, but almost always baffling as well” (175). As opposed to the depictions of these ‘sinister’ figures, though, it seems that Naylor’s project is to reclaim conjuring and conjure women as she works through the much more complex practices they implement, thus giving them an authority not always found in depictions of conjure, and writing against contemporary accounts of conjure as simply ‘evil.’ Through Sapphira, Mama Day, and Ruby, Naylor depicts the complicated nature of conjure, in

²⁵ Tucker also describes different forms of conjure depending on geographical location and culture. She claims “while conjure appears synonymous with witchcraft, rootwork, and voodoo, it may be useful to begin by noting these terms are linked to the locales where they are practices, so that Hatian voodoo and Cuban santeria differ from the obeah practices in the Caribbean” (177). These variations are important to note, especially as the conjure in Naylor’s *Mama Day* does differ from these forms of conjure depicted, as it centers mainly on rootwork and hoodoo.

its good, bad, and everything in-between, and throughout she places the power of such practices in the hands of the conjure women.

Sapphira is described in the novel with the word ‘conjure’ from the very beginning, for she was a “true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending on which of us takes a mind to her” (Naylor 3). This variety of description calls to her own passing down of conjure to her descendants—she takes on all the colors possible because she is in every one of her people, through conjure. Conjure is depicted as an ancestral practice, for, as Tucker explains:

conjure abilities are found to run in families; the conjure man or woman inherits his/her aptitude of power, along with an expertise in herbal medicines. Conjure women often carry the Mother and hold considerable power within their communities, and conjurers are, almost without exception, especially gifted with psychic abilities, or are known to have second sight. (176)

Sapphira, the “great, great, grand, Mother” (Naylor 218) who conjured her way into giving the deeds of the island to the Willow Springs people and rid them of Bascombe Wade, passes her ‘considerable power’ onto Miranda Day, the first girl child after two generations of male descendants, and the great-grandchild who continues the tradition of the conjure woman.

Mama Day, who all the residents of the island look to for healing and advice, utilizes many of the capabilities depicted by Tucker, of ‘expertise in herbal medicines,’ ‘psychic abilities’ and ‘second sight’ to manage the balance of Willow Springs and maintain its space as a Black feminist utopia. She describes her own understanding of her conjure abilities as “disguis[ing] a little dose of nothing but mother-wit with a lot of hocus-pocus,” calling to the both the matriarchal ancestry of her conjure with the use of ‘mother-wit’ as well as her true abilities, supernatural in their ‘hocus-pocus’ (Naylor 97). Our first introduction to Mama Day is a scene where she showcases her pre-knowledge, or perhaps psychic abilities, as she watches as

“A little drop of vapor beads up on the tip of an apricot leaf and shines there in the morning sun” and she “smiles as the beat of water turns golden in color—my, what a pleasant surprise... Baby Girl is coming today, a little earlier than expected—and on the airplane to boot” (Naylor 34). There are other similar occasions in the novel where Mama Day is alerted to the arrival of her grand-niece Cocoa, but her psychic premonitions also alert her to potential disaster, almost serving as foreshadowed warning signs for her family and her fellow Willow Springs islanders. One such instance can be seen in the foreboding scene during Candle Walk when Miranda walks to the other place and, listening to the wind from The Sound, feels “Up and down this path, somehow, a man dies from a broken heart” (Naylor 118). The image of the broken heart is seen again when Miranda is threading needle through a quilt using her ancestor’s fabric, and of the “homespun” and she claims that “the woman who wore it broke a man’s heart” (Naylor 138). Both of these instances are a kind of ‘second sight’ that sees into the future of George’s death, who does indeed die of a broken heart, for physically his “heart burst” on his journey to save Cocoa (Naylor 302). This same premonition is ‘seen’ or perhaps ‘heard’ by Cocoa as well, for she hears “in the breeze from The Sound” the voices of her ancestors saying, “Over and over: *you’ll break his heart*” (Naylor 224). This suggest that Mama Day’s conjure abilities get passed down to Cocoa, and thus she continues the legacy of conjure women²⁶.

Another instance of Mama Day’s ‘second sight’ appears when she is warned about the hurricane that hits Willow Springs and breaks the bridge over The Sound, which is paralleled with Cocoa’s illness as a result of Ruby’s conjure. At first Miranda feels “death all around her” and questions “This here was a real death. But whose? It didn’t have to be a who—it could be a what” (Naylor 226). This moment could be a ‘second sight’ towards Cocoa’s decline towards

²⁶ Cocoa and her legacy to continue the Black feminist utopianism of Willow Springs will be explored more thoroughly later in this thesis.

death or perhaps George's death which was necessary to save Cocoa. It also seems to alert, though, to the oncoming storm, which, through her connection and understanding of nature, she realizes is forthcoming. She explains how "them high high hills the crawfish built around the mouths of their burrows," the "kingfishers and bank swallows nesting way way up from the water... Buzzard's bees are clustered close close to the door to their hives" leading her to the realization that "This was gonna be a big big storm" (Naylor 227). To her, this second sight is common sense, for "You just gotta watch all these creatures long enough to find out what's going on in the elements where they live" (Naylor 227). It is undeniable that Miranda has a strong connection to nature as a result of her conjure abilities, for she is the woman for which "her trees sang and her flowers took flight" (Naylor 224). She listens to nature in a way that others do not, seeing the storm's approach in "them snake trails she had to cross to get to the other place. Them diamondbacks and copperheads are always the last to smarten up. No, next to last; after the snakes came all them meters and graphs down at the Hurricane Center" (Naylor 243). Nature gives her a kind of pre-knowledge and second sight that is not understood by Western science, such as the meteorology that is likely practiced at the Hurricane Center. Mama Day has a relationship with the environment that goes beyond what can be measured and charted. In some ways this centering of nature is analogous to the presence of nature in many (non-Black) feminist utopias. Alessa Johns describes how "The work of modern feminists has often coincided with the values of environmentalism" and that this is seen in feminist utopianism as well, such as in Gilman's *Herland*, where "women plant a variety of trees with 'due regard... paid to seasonable crops'" and how "'everything which came from the earth went back to it'" (Johns 189-191). In many feminist utopias, Johns explains, "technological innovation is matched by environmental awareness" (190). This keen awareness of nature and the environment for some

even “suggest[s] a special connection of women to nature” (Johns 191) much like that of *Mama Day*’s Miranda. Johns analyzes that such instances can be seen in Gearhart’s *The Wanderground* where the “hill women live in ‘a green world’” and in Le Guin’s *Dispossessed* when a character takes a leaf or rock into her hand and it becomes “‘an extension of it, it of her’” (Johns 191). In quoting Joanna Russ, Johns illustrates how in many feminist utopias the women feel “a strong emotional connection to the natural world” (191). Such a description could be directly applied to *Mama Day*, who’s emotional connection with nature is undeniable in her listening to the island creatures, the tending to her hens, and her knowledge of rootwork. But, Naylor writes Miranda’s relationship to nature as a part of her conjure and therefore it is also fundamental to her African American roots. The obvious association with feminist utopianism and nature is apparent, but it is centered in a Black woman’s experience and understanding of nature and conjure, thus further establishing Willow Springs as a specifically Black feminist utopia.

Mama Day’s deep kinship with nature is also demonstrated in the rootwork and medical knowledge she applies to heal and give advice to the Willow Springs islanders which centers the utopian community around her presence and her conjure practice. When a resident of the island, Carmen Rae, seeks out Mama Day in the night to “give her a little medicine to work the worms out of her baby,” Miranda diagnoses the baby with “croup” and uses rootwork and her ‘mother-wit’ to heal the child (Naylor 192). She first cleans Carmen Rae’s kitchen and cupboard, to ensure the space is sterile before she lays out her “teaspoon of senna pods, coltsfoot, horehound, white cherry bark, and black cohosh set to steep” which she “weighs out by touch” (193). After feeding the mixture to the child while also giving him “special vapors to breathe” (193), Mama Day does not leave without reprimanding Carmen Rae for the neglect of her children while simultaneously giving her advice—she tells her:

A sow takes better care of her young. And don't be sitting there whining about a no-good daddy—if he ain't never here, it means he ain't stopped you from cleaning this house. And he ain't the cause of you suffering this child with white bread and sugar lard to keep him quiet whiel you're watching soap operas. That's right, cry, you oughta cry. And while you at it, use them tears to water the truck garden you're gonna start growing with a dollar's worth of seeds and a little work. Chickens will eat anything you won't eat—even their own mess—and give you eggs for breakfast to boot. (Naylor 194)

Mama Day's 'mother-wit' and admonition of Carmen Rae illustrates her ability to maintain the balance of Willow Springs and cultivate its utopianism. She alleviates the child's sickness, for as she says, "the child was gonna make it," and she urges Carmen Rae to become a better mother, to grow her own food and raise chickens, and to become more self-sufficient (Naylor 194).

These are major aspects of Willow Springs more generally: the community is self-reliant, and Mama Day, with the support of her rootwork and conjuring, will ensure that. Her healing capabilities go beyond simple remedies for illnesses and ailments, though.

A more complex instance of Mama Day's conjuring is in her work with Bernice and the conception of Bernice's child, Charlie, also known as Little Caesar. We are introduced to Bernice when her husband Ambush goes to Mama Day because Bernice is "awful sick" and "thinks she's gonna lose the baby" (70). This is the first glimpse into Bernice's issues with fertility and her desire with to have children, something that Mama Day ultimately helps her with through conjure. In this first scene, though, we find that Bernice is not pregnant but actually has ovarian cysts from Perganol that she has been taking for two months in order to try and become pregnant. Mama Day's diagnosis of Bernice speaks to her medical capabilities, but even more so, her examination is testament of a kind of woman-centered knowledge only know through being a midwife for the utopian community. As she "slides her fingers up into Bernice real gentle," there is sense of trust through known expertise and ability, for Mama Day's "wrinkled fingers had gone that way so many times for so many different reasons. A path she knew so well that the

slightest change of moisture, the amount of give along the walls, or the scent left on her hands could fix a woman's cycle within less than a day of what was happening with the moon" (Naylor 75). Miranda's knowledge is due to years of delivering children and seeing the Willow Springs residents for their illnesses and ailments, and her conjure abilities are then employed for easing their pain and remedying their maladies after diagnoses. While she cannot cure Bernice's cysts, for "her knowledge does not extend to chemically constructed drugs" (Tucker 178), she does practice rootwork and finds choke-cherry bark from the woods to lessen her pain and relax her body until Dr. Smithfield gets there. Before she leaves Bernice's house, which she does only after she has ensured that Dr. Smithfield has properly addressed Bernice's cysts, she promises to help Bernice conceive, mentioning that they may have to "go to the other place together in the end" (87).

Mama Day's support in helping Bernice conceive a child is a significant illustration of her conjure abilities, and the act of conception itself here is a specifically women-centered endeavor. Before going to the other place though, Mama Day uses her 'mother-wit' to strengthen Bernice's mind through hope. She takes "a handful of pumpkin seeds and shook 'em up in a bottle of saffron water, then another handful of crook-neck squash and mixed them into a little dewberry juice" for Bernice to plant when she menstruates and when her mother-in-law says something negative to her. This gives her "something to hope for" because even though, as Abigail points out, they are "nothing but pumpkin seeds," Mama Day claims that "Bernice is gonna believe what I tell her they are—magic seeds. And the only magic is that what she believes they are, they're gonna become" (96). While this is not conjure, it is telling of Mama Day's maternal knowledge, or as she calls it, 'mother-wit,' which gives Bernice the ability to hold on to her hope for a child until they go to the other place. When spring comes, the season of

fertility, Bernice goes to the other place in a scene filled with mysticism and ambiguity, where there is an egg with a shell “still pulsing and wet” and, it seems, a hen, which lays her egg inside of Bernice, through “ancient fingers keeping each in line” as “the egg moves from one space to the other” and “A rhythm older than woman draws it in and holds it tight” (140). Shrouded in a kind of supernatural magic, Bernice’s conception of her child is only explained as a part of Mama Day’s conjure abilities and the liminality of the other place. This is an experience that is emblematic of Willow Springs as a Black feminist utopia, for the act itself is entirely woman-centered and only possible through the very specific African American-rooted tradition of conjure performed by the central figure, Mama Day.

Mama Day is not the only conjure woman of Willow Springs, though, as Ruby is positioned as a kind of foil to Miranda, especially in her own implementation of conjure. Ruby is not a direct descendant of Sapphira Wade, and thus perhaps is not a part of the island’s matrilineality, but she is still significant to the novel’s depiction of conjure, particularly in the challenge she poses to Mama Day. Ruby’s conjure is seen by most scholars as a much more insidious practice, as she uses it to harm others for her own personal gain, often because of jealousy. In this way, Ruby complicates the picture of the Black feminist utopia of Willow Springs—it is by no means “perfect,” but perhaps this makes it that much more of a Black feminist utopia. If a utopia were the picture-perfect image that we often stereotype it as, it would not be grounded in realism, and the subversive nature of Willow Springs would be seen as simply unattainable rather than its depiction of a community that is complicated, but ultimately centers Black women’s lived experiences—something that our own society should strive towards. While the island is perhaps otherworldly, it still contains real people who are flawed and have complex lives and stories. Ruby’s conjure, and other imperfections of Willow Springs,

provide a kind of realism to the island. The island must be balanced—it cannot be purely good or purely evil, much like conjure is balanced. As Saber explains, “Ruby’s presence in Naylor’s narrative asserts that the folkloric coin of conjuration has two faces. She supplies the missing part in the big puzzle of the novel’s conjure and makes the picture complete. Although her conjure is evil, her presence demonstrates that good and evil are far from absolute in black conjure” (389). Ruby’s practice demonstrates her expertise and knowledge of rootwork and conjure, which “appears to equal Miranda’s, but she is associated more with killing than healing” and “indeed has been implicated in at least two murders by poisoning” (Saber 384). Perhaps Ruby’s conjuring capabilities are a testament of when conjure goes too far for one’s personal gain, but no one can deny that she practices from the very same African American folk tradition that Mama Day does, and therefore contributes significantly to the island’s mysticism and Black feminist utopianism.

The ingredients Ruby uses in her conjure are particularly ‘rooted’ in the true conjure tradition. In her murder of Mary Ellen, she uses “castor bean” which “causes death because its outer covering contains toxic ricin” (Saber 384). Adding deadly nightshade to snakeroot, Ruby “fulfills a double mission of tying her bond with Junior Lee,” explains Saber, who quotes Zora Neale Hurston in clarifying that such a mix of materials, “destroy[s] her rival because this combination is used to ‘bind together hearts and prosperity and [it] will tangle up and hinder those you don’t want to succeed’” (Saber 384). Ruby’s proficiency in rootwork is telling; she is working from a specific knowledge and understanding of the conjure tradition. But, instead of her conjure “triggering fear and respect on the island, Ruby’s conjure only alienates and marginalizes her; she has no friends and is usually seen in isolation” (Saber 383). In many ways, the utopian residents respond negatively to her use of conjure, thus, in a sense, putting her in her

place by not humoring her abilities through a show of fear. Instead, they often make fun of her, calling her a “fat, ugly woman” (Naylor 90), and claim that the “jokes don’t end. There’s one for every pound on Ruby” (134). Even so, as Saber interprets, “Ruby’s conjure is not a joke” (383). Her poisoning of Mary Ellen is exemplary of her proficiency in conjure, which ultimately affects Mama Day’s own kin, her grand-niece Cocoa.

Ruby’s conjure of Cocoa is particularly interesting, as her rootwork and magic takes on another level in its connection to a specific African American experience. Ruby poisons Cocoa in a way that is, at first, unnoticeable, because it is executed when she braids Cocoa’s hair. As Saber illustrates, “Ruby chooses a moment of bonding to apply her poisoning, for hair braiding is an activity that brings women closer in African American culture” (386). Hair is also significant to conjure tradition, as Monica A. Coleman discusses in her article, “‘The Work of Your Own Hands’: Doing Black Women’s Hair as Religious Language in Gloria Naylor’s ‘Mama Day’.” Coleman claims that in the conjure of Gullah culture, which has often been linked to Willow Springs because of its geography, “hair is a locus of activity of those who know how to channel the power of God, and it is one of the greatest places of individual vulnerability” (130). Having one’s hair done opens one up to a certain kind of vulnerability that is unique to a Black experience and the practice is often a moment of connection between two Black women. This is detailed in Cocoa’s experience of having her hair braided by Ruby, where she sits and expresses how “twenty years melted away under [Ruby’s] fingers as she sectioned and braided my hair” (246). The experience itself is enveloped in a sense of nostalgia as Cocoa feels Ruby tighten her braids:

She’d comb, pull, and loop, giving me the loose strands caught in the teeth of the comb. A gentle nudge and I knew to bend my head, turn it to the left or right. Tight braids. So tight they pinched my scalp up along the temples and nape. Always tight braids to last two or three days of school. And my palm coming up for the loose strands of hair. A ball

of hair in my hands to be burned when we were through. A bird will take it and make a nest—you'll have headaches for all your life. All unspoken and by rote. I felt a void when she was done. A thank you meant hearing my own voice, older and deeper; a walk back home to pass you on a ladder fixing shutters, a need to pretend that your stony face didn't matter. (Naylor 246)

Here Cocoa seems to enter a liminal space, where she is completely vulnerable and subsumed by the 'rote,' repetitive, nostalgic feeling of her hair being braided. In this passage, she also alludes to the burning of her loose strands of hair, and later it is revealed that Ruby keeps some of these strands for herself, as she "brushes a few strands from her lap into her hand and puts them in her pocket" (247). This becomes a kind of foreshadowing for Cocoa's oncoming illness as a result of Ruby's poisoning, for through situational irony, we as readers recognize the foreboding tone of this act, where Cocoa is vulnerable to Ruby's conjure. It is also understood because of a tradition of hair burning within African American culture, as Cocoa explains of the folk tale that a bird might "take it and make a nest" (246), but there are also other beliefs, such as that "hair combings are to be destroyed or should never fall into the hands of an enemy or else they will turn into worms" (Saber 387). This ends up happening to Cocoa, who's illness manifests in one way through a kind of "rot inside her" that is imagined as worm-like creatures, which she claims she feels "were pouring down over me and crawling into every opening of my body" (297). Ruby accomplishes this poisoning through the use of nightshade and snakeroot on Cocoa's braids, which Lindsey Tucker explains "involves nothing mystifying—both are well-known and proven poisons in the hands of the experienced conjurer" as well as "graveyard dust" which also is not particularly unique or exclusive (Tucker 179). But, because of Ruby's conjure capabilities, she is able to cause both physical and mental distress to Cocoa, and, as Saber suggests, "Ruby's poison is multi-layered; she destroyed Frances mentally and Mary Ellen physically, but she seeks

to do both with Cocoa” (388). Such an intense conjure can only be met with an even greater response, as is shown by Mama Day’s response to Ruby’s conjuring.

Mama Day’s counter to Ruby’s poisoning of Cocoa is a true demonstration of her own conjure abilities and attests to her figure as the prominent ‘conjure woman’ of Willow Springs, bringing balance back to the utopian island. She first tends to Cocoa, for once she recognizes that the conjure has taken place through Cocoa’s hair, she cuts it instead of what Ruby likely hopes she would do which is “discover the nightshade and think that’s all it was... [and] spend her time untwisting them braids and washing the poison out of her hair” (264). Mama Day realizes that this time would be wasted, as Ruby’s poison has already done its damage and sunken deep beneath her hair, so instead, she cuts off each braid and watches as “They fall, curled up like worms on the pillow around Cocoa’s face” once again alluding to the folktale belief of hair turning into worms (264). As Coleman claims, “This act marks the beginning of Cocoa’s recovery” (122) and Mama Day realizes that George is needed to truly save Cocoa, so she sets on the task of her own revenge against Ruby. Her actions are a demonstration of her ability to correct, or at the very least gain a kind of justice for, the wrongdoings of community members. As said before, Ruby is proof that the utopian Willow Springs is not a ‘perfect’ society without flaws, but rather a realistic Black feminist utopia that experiences issues but learns and grows from them. For Mama Day, Ruby’s conjure of Cocoa is the last straw and her actions finally provide a kind of retribution for Ruby’s crimes. In *The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller’s Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan*, Trudier Harris delves into Mama Day’s actions against Ruby, claiming that “Mama Day creates a private hell for Ruby” (86). The way in which she does so is clear evidence of Mama Day’s strength, both in her conjure abilities and in her position as a kind of ‘matriarch’ or ‘mother’ of the island. She first

“goes to Ruby’s house and calls her out; the implication is that, unlike Ruby, Mama Day is willing to play fair and confront Ruby in an open, direct contest of power against power” (Harris 86). Of course, Ruby does not answer, and so Mama Day calls out again twice more to “ensure that she is being fair before she ‘sets the spell’” (Harris 86). This is one instance where Mama Day is positioned as a more mature and knowledgeable conjure woman—though Ruby is powerful and capable in her conjure abilities, Mama Day is steady and civil. She allows Ruby a chance to fight back, instead of conjuring her without warning, as Ruby did, calling “Are you in there Ruby?” (Naylor 269); she responds to Ruby’s cunning deceit with a resolute candor. When Mama Day finally realizes that Ruby will not meet her match and instead will hide from her offenses, she strikes Ruby’s house with her cane, which is her father’s walking stick, and applies a silvery powder after each attack on the sides, front, and back of the house. As Harris emphasizes, “*Then she leaves*” (Harris 86)—when the conjure hits Ruby’s house, she is asleep, as “the lightning... hits Ruby’s twice, and the second time the house explodes” (Naylor 273). Harris analyzes that Mama Day’s actions here are “almost surgical, detached” (86). In many ways, she simply does what had to be done, to protect her grand-niece, but also to restore good back to Willow Springs after the tragedy that Ruby brought to the island and to her family. George’s narration of what happened to Ruby indicates such retribution, for he claims, “It seemed that she’d had a host of sins, going back several years, so the destruction of everything she owned and the burns on her body was her getting her due” (Naylor 274). In some ways, Naylor depicts conjure as an ability used by Mama Day to regulate and maintain order and peace for Willow Springs in lieu of law enforcement²⁷. She is the main figure of the island, and she maintains her status as such through her connection to the folk tradition of conjure.

²⁷ More discussion of Willow Springs’s lack of law enforcement its significance to follow in the section, “Willow Springs: The Geography and Liminality of a Utopia”

Through her depictions of conjure, Naylor returns to what Harris claims is ‘the basis for most African-American literature,’ African American folklore (Harris, *Fiction and Folklore* 2). Naylor centers Black women and their lived experiences in the novel, beginning with her creation story through the goddess and mother Sapphira, who passes her abilities down to Miranda. But this ‘beginning’ of Willow Springs with Sapphira’s reclamation, as well as the continued existence of the island as a Black feminist utopia through Mama Day, is only made possible through nuanced depictions of African American folk traditions, such as conjure. And Saber extends this line of thinking even more, citing Valerie Traub’s claim that “Mama Day is a narrative of return,” and further explaining that “Cocoa returns to Willow Springs, George returns back to his black roots, Mama Day returns to her past, and Naylor returns to African American folklore” (Saber 289). In many ways it is true that Naylor experiences a ‘return’ home through *Mama Day* and her depiction of African American folk traditions, much like many of the characters in the novel experience a ‘return’ home as well. For the characters, though, this home is an actual place—the mystical island of Willow Springs that exists in liminality and uses the African American folk traditions that Naylor herself ‘returns’ to as the basis for its Black feminist utopianism.

B. Willow Springs: The Geography and Liminality of a Utopia

The island of Willow Springs is described as ethereal and otherworldly in its place as the central location of Naylor's *Mama Day*. While the novel does take place in New York City as well, the primary setting of the novel is Willow Springs, the island that is the Black feminist utopia that Cocoa continuously comes back home to. In many ways, Willow Springs achieves its utopianism through its liminality. Physically, it is un-bordered—it is a “barrier island” (Naylor 250) and therefore completely surrounded by water, unconnected to any particular state or nation. As the first-person plural voice of the island narrates in the beginning of the novel, “Willow Springs ain't in no state” even though “Georgia and South Carolina done tried” to make it a part of their states (Naylor 4). The only thing that connects it to the United States of America, what islanders call the ‘mainland,’ is a bridge over The Sound, which ends up being destroyed by a hurricane and has to be rebuilt in the novel, thus demonstrating the bridge's fragility and just how ‘un-bordered’ the island truly is. In many ways, this bridge also serves as a symbol of the required physical and cultural crossing one has to do in order to enter the liminal space of Willow Springs. There must be required effort to “cross over here from beyond the bridge” (Naylor 3), and thus cross into a specific type of being and knowing that is particular to Willow Springs and its culture. Entering this Black feminist utopia, then, is only possible through knowledge that the island exists, for it is not present on any map, as George laments later in the novel when Cocoa brings him to Willow Springs. And once one enters, they must play by the rules and regulations of the island and its residents, which inhabits a particular culture centered in African folklore and traditions, through which we see its Black feminist utopianism.

Willow Springs is already rooted in an African origin as many scholars suggest that it is a part of the Sea Islands, which are a chain of barrier islands around the coast of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, exactly where Naylor positions the mystical world that is centered in her novel. According to Monica A. Coleman, the Sea Islands are “a repository of Gullah culture” which is unique because “the Gullah people were able to retain more traditional African American practices and beliefs than most other Black slaves and their descendants in America” (126). Coleman explains that this was possible because about “70% of all incoming slaves... to the Sea Islands were drawn from the Angola region” and therefore retained a sense of culture and community particular to that region, in addition to the fact that “the Sea Islands were relatively isolated from mainstream European and African American culture” (126). The latter is distinctly seen in Willow Springs, for it is somewhat isolated as a liminal space, which serves to strengthen its distinctly African and Black feminist utopian culture. Even though Willow Springs is fictional, Naylor has positioned it geographically to be part of the Sea Islands and so Gullah culture likely contributed to her creation of Willow Springs. As a result, the island is situated within the specific traditions and practices that are unique to its geography, all of which contribute to its utopianism.

Naylor contrasts the setting of Willow Springs with that of New York City, where Cocoa meets George, to further establish the unique culture of the island as compared to that of the ‘mainland.’ Nesrin Yavaş mentions that “through juxtaposition of two distinct worldviews, one magical and mythical, and the other realistic, Gloria Naylor creates, both at the narrative and the thematic level a liminal territory where plurality of worlds, views, and spaces and heterogeneity are valorised” (248). Naylor does not limit us to a single world view or culture, and even the livelihoods of those in Willow Springs are diverse and complex. This is largely achieved through

the mysticism and liminality she surrounds Willow Springs with, as Yavaş continues, “This liminal territory situated between the ‘real’ and the magical dismantles the distinctions between the ‘real’ and the magical, opening up a space where the unrepresentable is represented and the unspeakable is spoken” (248). The ‘real’ in this case could stand in for the mainland, symbolized through the New York City, which, when seen through Cocoa’s eyes, is cold and cutthroat, with restaurants “designed for assembly-line nutrition... there was nothing to encourage you to linger” (Naylor 13). By contrast, Willow Springs, through its liminality, inhabits a space where residents seem to thrive, where, to reiterate Yavaş, ‘the unrepresentable is represented and the unspeakable is spoken’ (248). Even so, though, the island is not a utopian enclave—it may exist as a liminal space, but it is not free from disaster, natural or otherwise. The island voice at the beginning of the novel tells us of tragedies the island has had to contend with, including “Malaria. Union soldiers. Sandy soil. Two big depressions. Hurricanes” (4). This speaks to the fact that despite being mystical, Naylor does not write of a utopia that denies realism, as Yavaş claims, the “magical realism never distances itself from realism” (248). Instead, Naylor provides us with a Black feminist utopia, one that sees and addresses “totalizing systems of knowledge, oppression and representation” (Yavaş 248), and in that seeing allows the residents to thrive through adversity, within their liminality, on their own land.

A significant contribution to Willow Springs’s Black feminist utopianism is that the land is owned by its people, something that has certainly been challenged by outside forces but is nonetheless maintained by its residents. The omniscient island voice that narrates the beginning of the novel claims that the island “belongs to us—clean and simple. And it belonged to our daddies, and our daddies before them, and them too—who at one time belonged to Bascombe Wade” (Naylor 5). This ownership and thus control over Willow Springs is maintained through

its geographical location and liminality. When the islanders got the deed for Willow Springs, the island voice claims that, “we wasn’t even Americans when we got it—was slaves. And the laws about slaves not owning nothing in Georgia and South Carolina don’t apply, ‘cause the land wasn’t then—and isn’t now—in either of them places” (5). The fact that Willow Springs, as a barrier island inhabiting a liminal space, is not constrained by any nation allows the residents to live outside of the laws of any governed country. Willow Springs is “un-bordered” and, as a result, the rules of bordered spaces, such as that of slaves not being allowed ownership of land, do not apply to the island. This liminality allows for the possibility of enslaved peoples owning their own land and therefore also their own bodies, thus complicating their terms of enslavement and resisting it. Such subversive potential makes the island a space that is particularly utopian for the islanders, even though it is still grounded in realism.

Just because Willow Springs is un-bordered does not mean that it is lawless—the island is still part of society, and therefore must participate, to a degree, in society’s regulatory guidelines. The island voice claims that the residents “pay taxes on the telephone wires and electrical wires run over The Sound” often through earnings from “all the fishing that’s done and sold beyond the bridge, all the little truck farming” as well as, when cotton was more abundant, through cotton farming, which they “baled and sold... beyond the bridge” and then “paid taxes to the U.S. of A” (5). Willow Springs is not completely isolated or secluded from the nations surrounding it—it may be hard to find on a map, but people do still know it exists, and for Willow Springs to continue existing as a community, they must pay taxes for electricity and power. But as the island voice continues, while they may pay taxes, “George and South Carolina ain’t seeing the shine off a penny for our land, our homes, our roads, or our bridge” (6). The utopian society continues to be utopian, in spite of American states and real estate developers

ving to purchase it. For, in the end, as long as the land is owned by the Willow Springs residents, they are able to maintain it as a part of their utopian community. A large part of this preservation of the land's ownership is because of Mama Day, who would not allow the land to be bought off by real estate developers and then gentrified as a "vacation paradise" (Naylor 4), which she knew would ultimately destroy the community. The omniscient island narrator discusses how the developers proclaimed "lies about 'community uplift' and 'better jobs'" but that the residents, through Mama Day, knew "it weren't about no them now and us later—was them now and us never" (Naylor 6). There is the understanding that despite the fact that they "coulda used the money and weren't using the land," in the end, their land would "make them [the real estate developers] a bundle of money" while they, the residents with "dark faces" would end up "cleaning toilets and cutting the grass" (Naylor 6). Here, Naylor is making a profound statement about the capitalistic colonization of islands that become tourist communities and she refuses such a fate for Willow Springs. Instead, Willow Springs is a Black feminist utopian community, governed and sustained by its people, with land that is owned by the residents and will not be sold to outsiders who are ignorant of the people of the island and their culture, traditions, and women-centered knowledge.

Ownership of Willow Springs is also particularly interesting because, as we learn in a conversation between Cocoa and George, the land is always ever owned by the Day family's descendants and therefore will always be owned by the people of the land and their future generations. When George muses to Cocoa, "I wondered how you ever brought yourself to leave a place like this. And you actually *owned* the land," Cocoa responds with "No, I don't own it. Our children own it" (Naylor 219). Of course, George does not quite understand, as he is not yet a part of island, and therefore is not attune to its culture. He counters, "But we don't have any

children” and Cocoa explains, “It’s always owned two generations down. That’s to keep any Day from selling it” and while Cocoa is technically ‘two generations down,’ it “flipped over to [her children]” when she was born (219). There is an automatic safeguard in this tradition that prevents Willow Springs from being sold away which would ultimately destroy the utopian community. As a result, ownership of the island is reliant on a concrete sense of futurity for the islanders, which is particularly utopian in its imagining of this futurity. There is the assurance that there will always be a future for the islanders in Willow Springs and that the utopia will continue through Cocoa’s descendants. Of course, George’s curiosity and confoundedness brings up the question to Cocoa: “what if you don’t ever have children?” (219). To which she responds, “I guess it reverts back to the original owner” (219). Again, George’s outsider position allows him to believe that the original owner is the dead Bascombe Wade, but we can likely infer that it is, in reality, Sapphira Wade, who gave the deed to the islanders themselves. As Cocoa further explains, “If Mama Day had to come back from her grave, this land isn’t going anywhere—believe me” (220). There is an understanding, then, that Willow Springs will always be owned by its people, whether this is possible through conjure or mysticism, such as Mama Day indeed ‘coming back from her grave,’ or based in a dependence on futurity, with the Day descendants ‘two generations down’ always owning the land.

Along with ownership of the land, the residents of Willow Springs also govern and, to use ‘outsider’ terms, “enforce” law themselves, which preserves and sustains the island’s utopianism. The island voice tells us that one of the reasons “it ain’t never crossed nobody’s mind to leave” (Naylor 248) is because “there ain’t no mayor, governor, or the like. If anything gets blown down, it’s understood everybody will get together and put it back up” (Naylor 249). Willow Springs does not adhere to Western perceptions of government and law, and as a result,

there is not one person in power that controls or regulates their way of life. Instead, there is a sense of community that is a constant—despite any interpersonal issues that may arise, all band together in the face of a tragedy, such as a natural disaster, and they do so to rebuild *their* community. The same applies to any issues of ‘law and order,’ for the sense of community keeps most crime away, as George notes, “People here didn’t even see the need to lock their doors at night” (Naylor 187). George as the outsider brings up a mainland ideology—the crime of breaking and entering—that is not necessarily applicable to Willow Springs, and therefore laws that would regulate such crimes are, perhaps, also unnecessary. Crime in some form does exist, of course, though it is not imagined the same way as the Western defined ‘crime,’ with one such example being Ruby’s poisoning of Cocoa, which was in a way ‘taken care of’ by Mama Day. And, as is explained by the omniscient narrator, “The folks here take care of their own, if there is a rare crime, there’s a speedy judgment. And it ain’t like the law beyond the bridge that’s dished out according to likes and dislikes, and can change with the times” (Naylor 79). Of course, Naylor is referencing the implementation of law in a place like the United States of America, where enforcement is truly ‘dished out according to likes and dislikes’ with white people being far more privileged to get away with the crimes that they commit compared to African Americans. In this image of a place without a police presence, Naylor depicts a profound vision of a Black community that is not terrorized by police brutality and senseless violence. She even alludes to such terrorism when the island voice shares the story of the new deputy from the mainland who decided to try and find the person who makes the moonshine on the island, with the implication that said person, Dr. Buzzard, would be arrested or much worse²⁸. He happens

²⁸ The idea of “much worse” is to address something we see every day as African Americans are murdered by police for little to no reason and criminalized for actions they did not commit. This is especially pertinent in wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi to address systemic violence against Black people, particularly instances of police brutality. Black Lives Matter was founded in 2013

upon Parris, who “hesitated, not ‘cause he was forming a lie, he was just stunned that some white boy would think there was any possible way he could get an answer to something like that” (Naylor 80). This is one instance where it is obvious that the Willow Springs islanders are the ones in control and in power here. They know that outside law enforcement has no place in their community, and they do not allow them to try and gain an authority that is not theirs, as we see with what happens to the deputy when he calls Parris a slur, and Mama Day warns, “You’ll address him proper before the night is over” (Naylor 80). This ‘white boy’ who to no doubt abuses his power and terrorizes those in the mainland, becomes a “fool” in Willow Springs, for he goes to wander the cypress swamp and finds his car with “three flat tires” during the “one of the worst lightning storms in a decade” (Naylor 80). The storm, as we find later when lightning hits Ruby’s house, is certainly an indication of Mama Day’s conjure, making her earlier warning come true, for “Willow Springs was one place that’s best left alone” (Naylor 81). Willow Springs where “there ain’t no sherrif to watch out for, and no jail to put [one] in if there was” (Naylor 79) introduces a land in which the lack of law enforcement in the form of police becomes significant to not only its cultural ethos but is also central to its ability to keep surviving *as a utopia*.

Much of the Willow Springs’s oral tradition also builds its Black feminist utopianism, creating a culture that is unique to its community, unseen in the mainland and therefore obviously developed and cultivated within the liminal space of the island. Trudier Harris speaks to the function of voice and language in the novel in her book, *The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller’s Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan*, claiming that the first person plural “island voice” creates a “kinship to the audience” (60), which ultimately

with the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer and continues to this day as a movement against systemic violence towards African Americans.

creates for a narrative where “That audience would favor enslaved persons over masters and oral history, represented by the voice of the narrator, over the written mythology of history” (59-60). The narration allows for the sense that the reader is getting a special, inside look into the utopian community of Willow Springs, and is therefore eager to “go willingly where [Naylor] leads” (Harris 60). This also means that the audience is able to see Willow Springs’s culture in ways that it may be unseen by the mainland, which is often unveiled through language and vernacular. For example, George claims that, “A week in Willow Springs was enough to understand that words spoken here operated on a different plane through a whole morass of history and circumstances that I was not privy to” (Naylor 256). Naylor does not waste time defining or explaining the use of phrases like “slow fall” (66) and what it means to “stand forth” (268), for to do so would be to write towards an audience that is not susceptible to ‘go willingly where she leads’ (Harris 60). Instead, the audience is immersed in the island traditions, which are intertwined with the Willow Springs vernacular in events like the Candle Walk and standing forth.

The practice of standing forth is particularly exceptional as it is exemplary of how Willow Springs is, intentionally or not, subversive in its traditions and rituals. When Bernice and Ambush’s child, Charlie, affectionately known as Little Caesar, dies in the Hurricane, the community comes together to “stand forth,” which, though a Western perspective, might look like that of a funeral. But, as Margaret Earley Whitt writes of the custom in *Understanding Gloria Naylor*, “The trappings of Judeo-Christian funerals—flowers, music, a manner of dress, tears—are all absent in the Willow Springs standing forth” (124). This is a ceremony that is central to the culture of the utopian Willow Springs and therefore it rejects mainland societal understandings of funerals and a ‘saying goodbye,’ as George somewhat critically expresses,

“the belief in an earthly finality for the child’s life,” and instead presents us with a valuing of memory and futurity (Naylor 269). In standing forth, the people of Willow Springs gather to remind Little Caesar of the first time they saw him, and then a look beyond to the next time they’ll see him again. These powerful statements of “When I first saw you... When I see you again” (Naylor 269) punctuate the scene, centered in “a community’s recollection of individuals beginning the relationship with the promise that at some later moment in time that relationship will pick up again” (Whitt 126). The standing forth itself happens suddenly, as George claims, “no one had given a signal, that I understood at least” (Naylor 268). Rather, Whitt explores how “The time is determined in a way which seems mystical to the outsider” (Whitt 124) as each person goes to the church “dressed apparently in whatever they were wearing when they knew the time had come,” with some in in smocks from the beauty parlor, freshly shampooed hair and towels, and others in house coats and fuzzy slippers (Naylor 268). Whitt interprets that, “As death interrupts life without warning, so does the standing forth interrupt life’s routines, catching people in all stages of public readiness” (124). And though there is a church and a minister, their presence is “marginalized” (Whitt 124), and George describes them as simply “concessions” (269). Standing forth is a ceremony that is indicative of Willow Springs’ values, centered in community, ancestry, and futurity. The community comes together to remember a relationship that is lost through death, but only for now, until that person will be ‘seen again.’

This idea that one could see their loved ones again is symbolized further in the “other place.” The other place, visited by the Day family, is a liminal space within a liminal space—it is a place where past and present seem to be joined, a visualization of the interconnectedness between a kind of mystical spirit world and the ‘real’ world. Miranda visits the other place frequently throughout *Mama Day* for various reasons: during Candle Walk, where she senses the

upcoming death of George (Naylor 118); to help Bernice conceive a child, she leads her to the other place; after Cocoa's illness, she awaits George's arrival at the other place. At one point, Cocoa claims that she had "seen Mama Day do a lot of things out at the other place," alluding to the amount of time that Miranda spends there (Naylor 97). It is also important to note that the other place has a strong connection to nature, which has been discussed as a significant part of feminist utopianism. When the Days (and George) enter the other place, they place "a bit of hanging moss to cushion each foot" (Naylor 150). They connect themselves to their roots, figuratively and literally speaking, as they take a part of the earth, which grounds them, and enter the liminal space of the other place, where they are "among the beginning of the Days" (Naylor 150). The other place is intertwined throughout the narrative of Willow Springs, for it is emblematic of the community's deep connection with ancestry. In one instance when we travel to the other place with Cocoa and Mama Day, we see its connection to the ancestors, as John-Paul, who is Miranda's deceased father, "waits to guide them back" into the other place, and tells his story to the audience—of his six brothers, his own father, and his grandmother Sapphira (Naylor 151). The other place is certainly a place of conjure, as we see from Mama Day's actions in it, but it is also a place where the Days can reunite with their family, allowing them to remember ancestral trauma but also rejoice in a familial connection and power that transcends the physical place of Willow Springs. The significance of family and ancestry emphasizes how unique the island is as a utopia, as well. While in many utopian stories we see a group of people intentionally forming a new utopia, on a new land, and therefore leaving to create a better place to live, Willow Springs is grounded in the history of its people. As a result, there is a valuing of the Day family ancestry, with the origins of Sapphira Wade, which is one that is particularly African American. In this Black feminist utopia, the lived experiences of the Willow Springs

people, both past and present, are valued and remembered, which is profoundly empowering. The other place is symbolic of Willow Springs as *home*, for the living and not, for the Days in the past and present, and, as we see towards the end of the novel, into the future, too.

Willow Springs is further illustrated as a liminal space through its figure as home, significant because of the prominence of “home” in both African American literature and feminist utopian literature. As the island voice muses, “Home. Folks call it different things, think of it in different ways. For Cocoa, it’s being around living mirrors with the power to show a woman that she’s still carrying scarred knees, a runny nose, and socks that get walked down into the heels of her shoes” (Naylor 48). When we are first introduced to Willow Springs through Cocoa’s eyes, it is through the configuration of the island as home, a place “You can move away from, but you never leave it” (Naylor 50). It is ever-present and always there for Cocoa to come back to when she needs it. “Home” is grounded in both place, depicted in its Southern, Africanist, Gullah-centered sensibilities as a Sea Island, and in identity, as the island is undeniably a part of the people of Willow Springs. Through positioning the island as home, Maxine L. Montgomery claims that “*Mama Day* disrupts and subverts colonial beliefs rooted in notions of white patriarchal dominance and works to create another narrative space—a liminal home—where a new subject and text can emerge” (166). In many ways, Willow Springs as a ‘liminal home’ bridges the use of ‘home’ in African American literature and in utopian literature, to reveal a Black feminist utopian space in *Mama Day*.

The presence of home in African American literature has been widely discussed by literary scholars and writers alike. In the book *The House that Race Built*, Toni Morrison writes a piece called “Home,” where she discusses the subject in connection to fiction and race, claiming that:

In no small way, these discourses are about home: an intellectual home; a spiritual home; family and community as home; forced and displaced labor in the destruction of home; dislocation of and alienation within the ancestral home; creative responses to exile, the devastations, and imperatives of homelessness as it manifested in discussions of feminism, globalism, the diaspora, migrations, hybridity, contingency, interventions, assimilations, exclusions. The estranged body, the legislated body, the violated, rejected deprived body—the body as consummate home. In virtually all of these formations, whatever the terrain, race magnifies the matter that matters. (5)

Morrison highlights the various configurations of home, ones we see in *Mama Day*'s Willow Springs such as a 'spiritual home' and a 'family and community home,' but also ones that exists outside of the utopian picture, homes centered in tragedy, but homes nonetheless. In all of these instances, though, she claims that 'race magnifies' home. The fact that Willow Springs is undeniably home for its African American people is not something that should be taken for granted. As we learn from the legend of Sapphira Wade, their home was fought for and reclaimed to be their own by the ancestral mother. This is a story grounded in the mass enslavement of African peoples, where homes were, as Morrison mentions, destroyed through forced labor and stripped away from them. Gloria Naylor presents us with an alternative in *Mama Day*, through a home that exists for its people and not a colonizing other. Toni Morrison continues in her essay that she yearns for a "new space [where] one can imagine safety without walls, can iterate difference that is prized but unprivileged, and can conceive of a third, if you will pardon the expression, world 'already made for me, both snug and wide open, with a doorway never needing to be closed.' Home" (12). Willow Springs *is* that home—it is a place where its people can thrive, for it was 'already made for them' as a Black feminist utopia.

"Home" is also a significant aspect of feminist utopian literature, which parallels the emphasis on home in *Mama Day*. Carol Pearson analyzes the concept of "coming home to mother" which is prominent in many feminist utopian works, such as in Gilman's *Herland*. She claims that "Feminist utopian fiction implicitly or explicitly criticizes the patriarchy while it

emphasizes society's habit of restricting and alienating women... upon discovering a sexually equalitarian society, the narrators have a sense of coming home to a nurturing, liberating environment" (63). There are similarities between feminist utopian literature and *Mama Day* in this "coming home," except that Naylor's novel criticizes not only patriarchy but also racism. As a result, Willow Springs is a 'nurturing, liberating environment' that is specifically for Black people, profound as a space that is both 'sexually equalitarian' and, in a sense, racially equalitarian as well. Pearson's concept of "coming home" is further illustrated in Cocoa's act of physically coming home to Willow Springs every August, something she is not willing to sacrifice for any reason. Pearson claims that "protagonists [of feminist utopian novels] typically assume that they will be alienated in a public world which demands the denial of such vital parts of the self as emotion, vulnerability, and spontaneity. The nurturing utopian societies allow for the full development of each individual within a supportive, secure environment" (65). Cocoa, who, through our island voice, muses about home as "being new and old all rolled into one" (Naylor 49) seems to thrive in Willow Springs, as opposed to New York City, which she positions from the beginning as George's and not hers (Naylor 17). Her home, too, is connected to her grandmothers, who are her mother-figures, which mirrors Pearson's discussion that "In these novels, reclaiming the self is often associated with coming home to mother. However, in contrast to the stereotype of a smothering, dependent, maternal woman, the authors take pains to define that mother as a fully human, free person" (65). 'Mother' in this case would be Mama Day, who is certainly a 'fully human, free person,' powerful in her conjure and healing capabilities and centered as the primary figure of the novel, as she disrupts the "matriarch" stereotype. As Cocoa comes home to mother, both physically to Mama Day and figuratively to Willow Springs as mother, the island serves, according to Montgomery, as "a site of healing and

renewal where parts torn as a result of the transatlantic journey are restored. Cocoa tells the reader regarding her ritual return to the island, ‘The rest of me—the whole me—was here’ (Montgomery 158). It is also important to note that after Cocoa’s poisoning, which certainly complicates the home as solely a space of security and safety, she is also healed within the home place, in her grandmother’s bedroom and bath. If Cocoa were to have left Willow Springs, it is questionable whether she would have ever fully healed from her illness. But in the utopian, ancestral, liminal home, she is able to regain her sense of self, with the help of her husband’s sacrifice, through the other place that she is “rooted” in (Naylor 285).

George, despite being positioned as an outsider at first, ultimately also finds home in Willow Springs. George’s presence in the novel and his position as one of its main characters is particularly meaningful considering Willow Springs as a Black feminist utopia. Unlike most feminist utopian literary texts, *Mama Day* does not envision a separatist utopian colony in Willow Springs. Instead, men are vital to the community of Willow Springs, even though it is Black women’s lived experiences that are mainly centered in the novel. Characters like Dr. Buzzard, Ambush, and Junior Lee are major parts of not only the novel, but the community at large. They become counterparts to the main women characters in many ways. Dr. Buzzard, may be seen as Miranda’s opposite or much lesser rival, but he also helps her to try and convince George of his role in healing Cocoa. While Ambush has little part in Bernice’s conception of Little Caesar, he is certainly a part of the family, and is undeniably a father and a husband both by title and by action. And though Junior Lee is not an entirely positive portrayal of a male character, he enlightens us to the flaws of Willow Springs, of which Ruby certainly wouldn’t be such a powerful actor in if not for him. These men are vital to the life and community of Willow Springs—they help to rebuild the bridge over The Sound, they are part of families and

relationships, and they are, too, the descendants of the legendary Sapphira Wade, if not literally then certainly figuratively. And while George is not a part of this ancestry, as Cocoa's counterpart, he too finds a place in Willow Springs and ultimately calls it "home."

In a way, George is first positioned as a foreign traveler that 'happens upon' a utopian land, much like the male travelers in texts like *Herland*, though Naylor challenges this trope in her portrayal of his journey. Firstly, George does not 'happen upon' or 'discover' anything himself—he is taken to the utopian land by Cocoa, and despite all of his attempts to understand the culture and people of Willow Springs, he cannot. George, as "a black orphan raised and educated in a government shelter for boys in the values of the white world" finds much to question about Willow Springs and all of its mysticism (Yavaş 250). Before his trip to the island with Cocoa, he tries to find it on a map, to which Cocoa responds, "Your maps were no good here" (Naylor 177). George tries to define and comprehend a land that is undefinable and liminal. Yavaş claims that George's attempts to "rationalize" Willow Springs is proof of his position as a "'white' urban professional sophisticate" and that he is "the epitome of Western rational, empiricist worldview, who relentlessly struggles to impose 'an all encompassing and logically consistent narrative' upon the sounds, people, customs, and myths of Willow Springs" (Yavaş 250). As a foreign traveler, George first imposes his own world view on the island, but as we see by the end of the novel, this approach ultimately fails. Many scholars have discussed this traveler trope in utopian literature, including Vieira who explains how the "Utopian traveller departs from a real place, visits an imagined place, and goes back home" which "situates the utopia at the boundary between fiction and reality" (8). While George certainly does situate Willow Springs between the boundary of fiction and reality, reifying its cultural mysticism and liminality by trying, and failing, to constantly define and rationalize it, in the end, he does not

necessarily 'go back home.' Instead, he dies to save Cocoa, which some scholars claim is the result of his impossible attempts to apply logic to the conjure and magic of the island. As Montgomery interprets, "Because the literal-minded engineer is either unable or unwilling to follow Mama Day's coded instructions, death is the penalty exacted for the outsider's failure to decipher [her] lore" (164). George, who's heart is too weak to live up to the task set for him, who does not understand the mysticism of Willow Springs, ultimately dies of a "broken heart" as foreshadowed by Mama Day. But, through the liminal possibilities of the island, his death is not the end of his story. Instead, the orphaned George finds "home" in the other place, where he becomes a part of Willow Springs. George "step[s] out of his male, Western, individualistic notions of self and step[s] into the matrilineal, magic, mythical world of Willow Springs" (Yavaş 252). And in his heroic death, he not only finds his liminal home in the island, but he also helps to continue Willow Springs as a Black feminist utopia. As Frosch suggests, "George's full function in the novel is, rather than to be defeated, to be transformed and to contribute to a transformation of Cocoa and her community of Willow Springs" (8). Cocoa not only survives because of George's sacrifice, she also becomes more fully connected to the other place, the even more liminal home of the liminal Willow Springs, as we see through her conversations with him at the end of the novel—and as we find out that the majority of the novel's narrative has been just that, conversations between Cocoa and George in the other place. Cocoa's relationship with George in the other place is indicative of her deep rootedness to Willow Springs, as the novel ends with the implication that the utopian land continues with her, the latest descendant of Sapphira Wade.

Through its liminality, Willow Springs thrives as a Black feminist utopia, for it is unbordered and therefore somewhat separate from the oppressive systems and structures outside of

the island. It is also owned and maintained by the islanders themselves, a Black community that endures through natural disaster and mainland influence, resisting neocolonialist tourism and gentrification. And, ultimately, the island is a home for its people who thrive in specific traditions and cultures that call back to their African roots. Willow Springs's liminality is likely possible only through Sapphira Wade's conjure abilities, which landed the island's deed in her hands, an ability that is passed down to her female descendants. Therefore, it can be said that the island's Black feminist utopianism stems from her, and accordingly, the island continues as a Black feminist utopia through her great-great-great-grandchild Cocoa, who we see in the end takes on the mantle of becoming the conjure woman, and perhaps "maternal figure," of the island and its people.

C. An Enduring Utopia: Cocoa's Continuation of Willow Springs

While Naylor's novel is named *Mama Day* after the infamous Miranda Day, who is arguably the most central character of Willow Springs, by the end of the narrative we are left with Cocoa's story and her continuation of the legacy of her great-aunt Mama Day and her great-great-grandmother, Sapphira Wade. Throughout the novel, there is an indication of Cocoa's potential affinity for conjure and her deep connection with her liminal home, particularly seen in her visits to the other place where she hears her ancestors in the wind and questions why George cannot also hear them (Naylor 223). Ultimately, she is the figure who allows the Black feminist utopia of Willow Springs to continue thriving—because of her, Willow Springs is not a failed utopia, like so many fictional lands are in utopian literature. Instead, in spite of its flaws, Willow Springs endures in its Black feminist utopianism through Cocoa.

Willow Springs is certainly not a perfect island. It is not isolated from tragedy—we see how destruction still impacts the island through natural disaster, such as the consequences of the hurricane in the novel. And while conjure is a significant aspect of the ability for Willow Springs to function as a Black feminist utopia, we also see how conjure can do harm through Ruby's poisoning of Cocoa and, arguably, Little Caesar's death, which some claim to be a result of Miranda 'playing God.' Still, these hardships do not lead to a 'failed' utopia—by the end of the novel, Willow Springs still stands and its people persevere. Through their "18 & 23'ing," they withstand the tragedy, evil, and retribution they have been allotted, whether doled out by an overseeing God or as simply as the consequence of living in a world impacted by societal oppression. In spite of the imperfections that run through Willow Springs, it is utopian because

of its people who *endure*. To return to the definition of utopia laid out in the beginning of this thesis, literary utopias do not truly depict “perfection”—rather, as Levitas claims, “Utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being” (5). It can be argued, then, that Willow Springs ultimately does achieve not only a better way of being, but a better way of living and thriving, of *enduring* in spite of tragedy. And this endurance is symbolized in the figure of Cocoa, who we see not only survives her misfortune, but persists to live and thrive beyond it, with the implication that she succeeds Mama Day’s position and thus sustains Willow Springs’s Black feminist utopianism.

Cocoa’s deep connection to her ancestry and conjure is what also connects her to the island’s utopianism, as the two are intertwined. Sapphira Wade’s actions are what established Willow Springs as a Black feminist utopia, and Cocoa must understand, as Mama Day puts it, “the beginning of the Days” (Naylor 308) in order for her to continue this legacy and maintain the Black feminist utopianism of Willow Springs. We see allusions to this throughout the novel with small hints of what Cocoa could become as a conjure woman and descendant of Sapphira. In spite of living in New York City, she returns home to Willow Springs annually to see her grandmothers, and she often visits the other place on her trips. On one such occasion, she claims that “As soon as I put the moss in my shoes, I could hear them all in the wind as it moved through the trees” alluding to her the voices of her ancestors that she can hear, much like her great-aunt Mama Day (Naylor 223). These voices seem to share a warning with her, “You’ll break his heart” (Naylor 224), which is the same exact warning that Mama Day also received when “listen[ing] under the wind” as it comes to her that “Up and down this path, somehow, a man dies from a broken heart” (Naylor 118). This is the first indication that Cocoa has a conjure ability similar to Miranda’s, which is deeply rooted in their connection to their ancestors. And

the warning itself is vital, as it is George's broken heart, his death, and his presence in the other place that ultimately leads Cocoa back to Willow Springs, to find the knowledge of 'the beginning of the Days.'

The end of the novel suggests that with time, patience, the overcoming of grief, and a leaving of Willow Springs before returning, Cocoa ultimately inherits Mama Day's place as 'mother' of the island through her own destiny in understanding her ancestral past. When George dies, Mama Day visits him in his new home in the other place and talks to him about Sapphira Wade, revealing her own lack of ancestral knowledge which has now fallen upon Cocoa to discover:

I can't tell you her name, 'cause it was never opened to me. That's a door for the child of Grace to walk through. And how many, if any, of them seven sons were his? Well, that's also left for her to find. And you'll help her won't you? she says to George. One day she'll hear you, like you're hearing me. And there'll be another time—that I won't be here for—when she'll learn about the beginning of the Days. But she's gotta go away to come back to that kind of knowledge. And I came to tell you not to worry: whatever roads take her from here, they'll always lead her back to you. (308)

In this one conversation, we learn about Cocoa's fate to continue Mama Day's own search for their ancestral origins, which is 'left for her to find,' "once she knows how to listen" (307). And, as Mama Day alludes to, Cocoa will need George to help her find this information, but only after she 'goes away' can she 'come back to that kind of knowledge.' The last few pages of the novel seem to be just this—Cocoa coming back to Willow Springs from her new residence in Charleston, married again and with children, to talk with George and begin to find this knowledge. Here in the final moments of the narrative is when we find that the entire novel has been Cocoa 'coming back to this kind of knowledge' for the whole book has been framed around Cocoa and George's conversations, with the island voice as our guide through the knowledge that Cocoa has not yet found yet. But as Naylor ends our own covert look into the origins of this

Black feminist utopia, she leaves us with the image of Cocoa's face, which has been "given the meaning of peace" and is "ready to go in search of answers" as she locks eyes with Mama Day, who is herself ready to go, to leave Willow Springs and her earthly existence (Naylor 312). As Whitt asserts, "the conjuring powers from the great, grand Mother, Sapphira Wade, also now reside in Cocoa. So Mama Day is free to go" (127). Cocoa continues the utopian land of Willow Springs by returning home and beginning her search for the answers of her matrilineal ancestry, which will connect her more deeply to the utopia's origins and give her the knowledge to maintain the land's Black feminist utopianism as it moves into the contemporary world.

Willow Springs continues as a Black feminist utopia, symbolized in Cocoa's search for knowledge, through its matrilineality and liminality, which are constants for the island in spite of changes brought by time. As a liminal space, there is a sense that the island may be untouched by time, as is claimed by the island voice, "Living in Willow Springs, it's sorta easy to forget about time. Guess 'cause the biggest thing it does is bring about change and nothing much changes here but the seasons" (Naylor 160). While this is true to a certain extent, we do see changes brought upon the islanders as a result of time, one example of which can be seen in Candle Walk. Mama Day frequently mentions how Candle Walk was different in her day, and in her father's day it was "different still" and that "her daddy said *his* daddy said Candle Walk was different still" (Naylor 111). The differences in Candle Walk, most recently brought by younger folks who use kerosene lamps, or even just their car's headlights, instead of wax candles are indications of changes to the island more broadly, stemming from advances in technology and its influence from the mainland. As the island voice proclaims, "You can't keep 'em from going beyond the bridge, and like them candles out on the main road, time does march on" (Naylor 111). But, for Mama Day, this is all minor as compared to the island's endurance, for she, "who is known to be

far more wise than wicked, says there's nothing to worry about" and that "it'll take generations, she says, for Willow Springs to stop doing it all. And more generations again to stop talking about the time 'when there used to be some kinda 18 & 23 going-on near December twenty-second.' By then, she figures, it won't be the world as we know it no way—and so no need for the memory" (Naylor 111). Here *Mama Day* alludes to a time where the utopia fails, where mainland culture permeates Willow Springs so thoroughly that the knowledge she hopes that Cocoa will find is lost. But, now is not that time, and it will not be that time for many 'more generations.' And so, for now, Willow Springs endures as a Black feminist utopia, and, as the first line of the last passage in the novel tells us, "some things stay the same" (Naylor 312). As long as its people live, and as long as the ancestral knowledge continues to be searched for, and perhaps ultimately found, Willow Springs's utopianism will continue even as it gets articulated and re-articulated. In some ways this mirrors womanism, for as Patricia Hill Collins explains, "As an ethical system, womanism is always in the making – it is not a closed fixed system of ideas but one that continually evolves through its rejection of all forms of oppression and commitment to social justice" (11). Similarly, Willow Springs continually evolves to adapt to new ways of being—it is always in the making, as Yavaş claims, "the magical reality of the island is embedded not in a static, unchanging, passive, nostalgic past; it is constantly re-articulated and adapted to temporal and social changes" (247). In order for the island to continue as a utopia, it *must* account for changes introduced by time; it must adapt, and be 're-articulated,' because, like womanism, or perhaps *through* womanism, as a Black feminist utopia it is also working towards a 'rejection of all forms of oppression and commitment to social justice.' For, while "some things stay the same," Naylor also writes of Willow Springs, of Cocoa's continuation of her legacy, that "some things are yet to be" (Naylor 312).

V. CONCLUSION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Black feminist utopianism has largely been excluded from scholarship on utopias and utopian fiction. I chose to explicate this absence and recognize the possibilities of Black feminist utopian spaces through an analysis of Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* by reading Willow Springs as a Black feminist utopian space. In its matrilineal depiction of conjure, the portrayal of the matriarchal Sapphira Wade, and its focus on the Willow Springs women, *Mama Day* is certainly centered in Black women's experiences, which flourish in the liminal space of Willow Springs. The island becomes a home unlike any other, governed and regulated by its people, which creates a culture and tradition that is unique to its people as well. In many ways, Willow Springs does become a kind of enclave—outsiders, like George, find themselves to be foreign to its customs, which all come back to the Goddess Mother, Sapphira. But, in other ways, it is also very much grounded in realism. The residents still experience loss and tragedy, at the hands of natural disaster and otherwise. The land is not completely isolated from outside mainland culture and therefore is influenced by traditions, technological advances, and people outside of Willow Springs. And still, the utopianism endures, perhaps because of, rather than in spite of, this influence. Willow Springs and its residents learn, through Sapphira first, then *Mama Day*, and finally, as we move into the 21st century, *Cocoa*, that what matters most *is* its people, the centering of their experiences, and the multitudes that are contained within them to withstand tragedy, outsider influence, and the oppressive forces. Through a depiction of Black feminist utopianism, Naylor provides us with a novel that depicts a Black community *thriving* in their

own space and on their own land, an image that is vital considering the ancestral trauma that often haunts Black stories and communities.

This is not to say that Willow Springs, or a place that looks similar to it, is by any means the *only* Black feminist utopian possibility, or that it is even a perfect Black feminist utopia. While it certainly depicts a “better” world to some extent, per the understanding of utopia and with the characteristics of Black feminist utopianism that were discussed earlier in this thesis, it certainly has its faults. And in thinking of utopia as a “better” world, I hope this would mean a better world for *all*, and the narratives included in *Mama Day* certainly exclude some perspectives. For example, there is little discussion of sexuality, constructions of gender identity, or able-bodiedness and ableism. There could be more explanation of how “law” is governed, or whether such regulation would even exist in a Black feminist utopia. There might be a different “punishment” for Ruby, or even insight into her life and acknowledgment of her humanity by community members. Willow Springs is certainly lacking in some ways as a Black feminist utopia, but in my analysis of it as such, my hope is that we see utopia in spaces where they have not been seen as such before or are not given a priority in the canon of utopian studies. Naylor’s *Mama Day* is not the only iteration of a Black feminist utopia that exists, and there is an opportunity to value Black women-centered spaces with utopian characteristics as the Black feminist utopian visions that they are, even if they are not currently recognized as such in scholarship.

My hope is that this reading of *Mama Day* will open more avenues of exploring Black feminist utopianism in literary fiction²⁹ as well as in other forms, such as film, music, community groups and activist centers, art collectives, and more. Once we begin to recognize Black feminist

²⁹ Another literary Black feminist utopia that will not be discussed in depth is *How Long ‘Til Black Future Month* by N.K. Jemisin, which uses a utopian world to address contemporary issues that we currently face in society.

utopianism and its characteristics, utopian visions can be seen in places where they may not have been seen as such before. One example of this might be seen in the group of Wakandian women warriors, the *Dora Milaje*, who are a part of the *Black Panther* Marvel comic book series. While the *Dora Milaje* work to serve Wakanda's crown, the women-centered group has much more complicated stories, as is detailed in *Black Panther: World of Wakanda* by Roxane Gay and Tanehi Coates. This comic could be considered a look into a Black feminist utopian space within Wakanda, even though it may not have been labeled as such before. The categorization of Black feminist utopia could also be applied to more academic works, like E. Patrick Johnson's *Honeypot*, where Johnson creates a fictional utopian "hive" space called Hymen to creatively narrate his interviews with Black southern women who love women. Johnson uses language that is particular to Black lesbian vernacular, such as the term "honeypot," the title of the book, and creates an almost otherworldly space with fictionalized depictions of the Yoruba deity Osun and the Osun River (Johnson xiii). As a result, *Honeypot* works from a combination of contemporary Black southern lesbian culture along with deep ancestral and African roots, which highlight the specific realities of the Black southern women loving women whom Johnson interviewed. In this work, Johnson gives these women a space in a Black feminist utopia created by and for them. As is seen in Johnson's work, which blurs the lines between academic scholarship and creative fiction, a Black feminist utopia might also resist strict definitions of form, which could prevent certain "texts" from being seen by traditional academia as utopian projects. One example of a potential Black feminist utopia that transcends form to some degree is *The Deep* by Rivers Solomon and the song, "The Deep" by clipping., a group comprised of Daveed Diggs, William Hutson, and Jonathan Snipes. "The Deep" by nature is intertextual and contains multitudes—the song by clipping. stems from a piece by Drexciya and introduces the concept of pregnant African

women who were thrown overboard the Atlantic Ocean on slave ships, and whose children were then “born breathing water as [they] did in the womb” and “built [their] home on the sea floor” (clipping.). Solomon then envisions this concept in their novel *The Deep*, which focuses on Yetu, a wajinru Historian who must hold the ancestral traumas of her people for them. “The Deep” as a concept centers the ancestry, suffering, livelihoods, and realities of the descendants of African women who persevered amidst tragedy and thus transcend corporeal human bodies and colonized geographies and create a space for themselves in the ocean. “The Deep” might envision a fictional Black feminist space that centers trauma and the subsequent collective healing from trauma, which becomes more possible in a utopian setting.

Of course, all of these examples could be argued to be imperfect as Black feminist utopias—they may still be exclusive, or too niche, or particular to a certain group of people. But, all, to some degree, challenge our perceptions of the world and go on to center Black women’s experiences and realities. And, again, there is no such thing as a perfect utopia, but rather, utopia is the vision of a better world. Therefore, strict standards of utopianism, such as perfection, has not necessarily been applied to utopian fiction, and as such should also not be demanded of Black feminist utopian fiction.³⁰ Instead, we should broaden our understandings of utopia to include Black feminist worlds and spaces.

³⁰ There are also “false” or “faux” Black feminist utopias, which are unlike imperfect Black feminist utopias, for they often risk sharing harmful or negative images of Black women and Black feminism under the guise of utopian imaginations. One such text that could be read as a “false” Black feminist utopia is *The Secret Life of Bees*, directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood and based on the novel by Sue Monk Kidd. The film portrays the Boatwright sisters, who live in a pink house that may seemingly depict a Black feminist utopia at first, but what is ultimately portrayed in the film are stereotypical “controlling” images (to borrow the term from Patricia Hill Collins), such as the mammy and the matriarch figures. While the intention may be to show a unique space created for and by Black women who own their own business selling honey, the film is viewed through the white eyes of Lily Owens, and thus her perspective overshadows any true Black feminist utopian possibilities of the text. Such faux Black feminist utopias exist much like faux utopias exist, and they allow for better understanding of the work of ‘real’ Black feminist utopias, which may be imperfect but certainly still endeavor to portray a “better” world for Black women.

One example of such broadening is in the work of *The Feminist Utopia Project* by Alexandra Brodsky and Rachel Kauder Nalebuff, who has compiled “fifty-seven visions of a wildly better future” by writers, artists, activists, educators, and more. While there are certainly some more white-centered ideas presented in the collection, many of these ‘social dreams,’ to borrow a term from Lyman Tower Sargent, could be interpreted as visions of Black feminist utopian worlds. Mariame Kaba’s “Justice” depicts a place called “Small Place (SP)” which envisions an alternative to law enforcement. Instead of police officers, SP has “peace-holders” who seek to resolve conflict “swiftly and peacefully” (Kaba 82). There are no prisons or jails in SP, which enlightens us to a future where justice is not based on punishment but rather on healing. Kaba’s short story is particularly interesting as it is told from the perspective of someone murdered in SP, and thus shows the most extreme example of violence and how it is consequently handled. Instead of the murderer immediately being put on trial, where they will be judged by those who have no personal attachment to the actual event, the community turns its focus on the victim’s family—with “talking circles, mourning circles, circles of support, and celebration circles” where they would share stories about the person’s life “through tears, anger, and laughter” (Kaba 87-88). Then, they turn to the murderer, who has now witnessed a community outpouring of love and pain as a result of losing this person, and they put her “in circle” so that she can “understand the impact of her actions on an entire community” (Kaba 88). Finally, the killer is dropped in the ocean, at which point the victim’s family decides to either save the life of the killer or let them drown, and if the decision is the former, then that person will “take the place of the person killed within the community” for “they are expected to pay a debt for the life taken for however long the harmed parties deem necessary” (Kaba 89). Kaba’s utopian world shares an incredibly unique image of justice which simultaneously critiques the

current justice system we have in the United States while also presenting us with an alternative, community-based vision of healing and growth. With the mass incarceration and state-sanctioned police violence that African Americans inarguably face in the United States through the prison industrial complex, SP shows us a space where justice is holistic and centered in the experiences of those impacted by violence, so that they become a part of the justice system rather than at the whim of one. Kaba's vision is truly one of a subversive and revolutionary Black feminist utopia that disrupts our understanding of law and order and presents us with the opportunity for a new insight towards collective growth and support.

Other utopian fantasies in *The Feminist Utopia Project* center specifically on women's experiences and seek to eradicate the harm that they principally face, such as that of street harassment and sexual violence. Many of these visions can also be seen to be Black feminist works, such as "Not on My Block: Envisioning a World without Street Harassment" by Hannah Giorgis. Giorgis imagines a world where she can live in harmony with men who "exist in the same warm ecosystem," unafraid of what might happen if she were to meet one's gaze (98). She claims, "In my feminist utopia, the story can end here. I am able to interact with other members of my community and appreciate the splendor of a kaleidoscopic city without fear of violence. I can smile at a man and know that he feels the joy radiating from my body without need to touch it" (Giorgis 98). Such a vision may not seem so revolutionary at first glance, but considering the amount of sexual violence and harassment that women face, and that specifically Black women face to an even higher degree than white women³¹, Giorgis truly presents us with a utopian vision

³¹ According to the National Organization for Women (NOW), "over eighteen percent of African American women will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime" but often these events go unreported or are under-addressed because of social stigmas against Black women due to "unfair stereotypes and destructive misrepresentations" that "perpetuate crimes against women" (National Organization of Women). And, when Black women do experience violence, "they are less likely to seek out help from law officials and law enforcement," often because of pervasive police brutality and state-sanctioned violence against African Americans. And, in terms of domestic violence, NOW reports that

in her peaceful world where she can “walk outside the place I call home at any time of day, in any outfit, and I do not have to invent a male partner to defend against street harassers” (99).

Some individuals and groups have begun to incorporate these Black feminist utopian ideas and characteristics into their real-world spaces. Cauleen Smith blends fact and fiction with her film *Sojourner*, which explores real collectives and groups that have intentionally explored what a “radically generous” community looks like and have built the foundations of utopian world building (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art). For Smith, a Black feminist utopia has always been possible, and she explores this in her film, claiming that “it’s possible to build a better world, it’s possible to be generous... it’s possible to make a better world, people do it all the time” (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art). Smith imagines this herself in her own film by bringing together women of color together to create an artistic piece that captures such possibilities. Similar work can also be seen by the group Shades of Noir, based in the United Kingdom. The collective claims itself to be an “independent program that supports: curriculum design, pedagogies of social justice through representation, cultural currency, [and] accessible knowledge” (Shades of Noir). They also detail the importance of creating “opportunities for marginalised groups and their need for safe spaces to articulate self-determination and liberate the struggles from oppressive structures both in education and society” (Shades of Noir). Shades of Noir’s website is a repository of art, design, film and media, editorials, and academic articles that serve to share the voices of the aforementioned marginalized groups, and ultimately becomes the vision of a safe space, or perhaps a Black feminist utopia, that centers the experiences of the oppressed rather than the oppressors.

“African American women are 2.5 times more likely to experience physical or sexual violence from a partner or spouse” (NOW).

These real instances and fictional visions of Black feminist utopian projects are just a few examples of the possibilities that arise when we re-articulate and re-angle our understanding of utopia and all that it may encompass to include Black women and their utopian imaginations. Utopian scholarship has not yet made space for Black feminist thought and utopianism, and, as can be seen by these wide-ranging examples, which do not even touch the surface of what exists in uncanonized literature, film, television, and other forms of media, this is not because Black feminist utopias simply do not exist, but rather because they are not often included in typical discussions of utopia. It is vital that we begin to recognize and value Black feminist utopianism, for there is true power and possibility in envisioning a better world from a Black feminist perspective. One of the epigraphs in this thesis, from the Combahee River Collective, was chosen to demonstrate the importance of Black women's voices and the freedom that arises when we center Black women's lived experiences: "If black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression" (33-34). A Black feminist utopia might imagine such a world where Black women's freedom is not only possible but central to that space, thus envisioning the work of 'the destruction of all systems of oppression.' Janet Mock also explores this potential in her version of utopia in *The Feminist Utopia Project*, insisting about the "free girl" that:

She is not merely included; she is actually centered. She is centered because there are no gatekeepers to womanhood. It belongs to her, and no one can police her out. She is centered because solidarity is an act, not a label. She will never tiptoe toward sisterhood. She is centered because our feminism is solidly built on the belief that our freedom lies in her being free. And she will expect nothing less from us because she is everything. This free girl is our liberation. (329)

The centering of Black women's voices is vital to the imagining of a better world for all, and there is true power in envisioning such a world created by and for Black women, centered in lived experience that is seen and heard. I see Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* doing this work of

centering and thus creating a Black feminist utopian possibility in Willow Springs that becomes an “act of rebellion” in and of itself in its imagination of a “better, freer life” for its people (Brodsky and Nalebuff 8). The speculative potential of utopian fiction becomes almost revolutionary in and of itself because we can then utilize such visions to make change in our current society. By imagining possibilities outside of our current experiences of oppression, we can create new avenues of change that might lead us closer to such utopian imaginations. Black feminist utopian fiction like *Mama Day* tells us that such a future is possible and makes that world into a tangible thing that could potentially be obtained if action is taken against systemic oppression. And, if we start to see such visionary spaces in literature, media, and elsewhere, we may also see the potential for *even better* and *even freer* lived realities—but first, we must choose to see Black feminist utopias, even where they have not been seen before.

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