

ACTIVISM, GENDER POLITICS, AND ENVIRONMENTALISM IN THE WORK
OF TONI CADE BAMBARA: A STEP TOWARD SOCIAL, MENTAL, AND
ENVIRONMENTAL WHOLENESS

By

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Abstract

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My thesis examines three interlinked themes in three chapters, activism, gender politics, and environmentalism in two works written by Toni Cade Bambara. I engage these three dimensions of Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* to construct a new way of reading Bambara: as a historian, as an advocate for progressive social change, as an environmentalist and as a prolific writer whose fiction, coupled with her non-fiction, particularly *The Black Woman*, stands as a testament to the need for consciousness and education in the world, and the need for a comprehensive understanding of the interrelated problems and possibilities of life in and beyond the US.

With an emphasis on Black and Third World Women, I note that Bambara's activism advocates for coalition politics that will deviate from the normal happenings that leave disenfranchised people, and in turn, the world, in compromising and devastating situations. I highlight Bambara's historical contribution in her fiction to speak on gender politics as she humanizes women participants in the Modern Civil Rights Era, and I also illuminate her as one of the first writers to boldly comment on environmental racism.

Overall, my thesis serves as a stepping point to help readers understand the importance and relevance of the writer Toni Cade Bambara to critical discourse. It highlights the truth by saying that the only way to achieve wholeness, the only way to help to make the world better than its existing state, is to be about action, coupled with a readiness to work with different cultures.

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Dedication

To my parents, Rosie Etta Edwards and Jessie Edwards, who keep me grounded and continue to support me financially and emotionally,

My Sister, Sharon Jessè Edwards, who always listens,

My Spelman Sisters, Toni, Vernita, Qiana, and Jamita, who push me and help me to remember my nia (purpose),

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In Memory of my Grandmother and she-ro, Rosie B. White (1916-2008), who instilled within me a strong work ethic

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Introduction

As an activist writer committed to progressive change, Toni Cade Bambara's work is deeply rooted in African, African - American, and Third World discourses that she draws on for a unique approach to speaking about issues that concern the environment, the community, and the liberation of oppressed groups through the method of coalition politics. Active in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, Bambara worked as a reformer through her teachings and scholarship. Some of her most notable writings include: *The Black Woman*, an anthology that is the pioneering text in Black feminist writing, several short story collections which include, but are not limited to: *Gorilla My Love* (1972), *The Sea Birds are Still Alive* (1977), and *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions* (which was published posthumously in 1996), and two novels, *The Salt Eaters* (1980) and *These Bones are Not my Child* (1987). With a passion for writing the lives of fictional women and issues of environment, Bambara like her friend and editor Toni Morrison, explores issues of oppression, insanity, and women's experiences; and, like her colleague Alice Walker, Bambara infuses history, fiction, and life to produce thoughtful, real, and provocative scholarship that centers on Black community life and the role of Black women in social change.

Bambara uses both fiction and non-fiction to convey revolutionary points about community mistreatment, coalition building, and real issues that plague disenfranchised communities. She broke the social, political, and academic color barrier as it relates to language about community and wholeness to reach ideas about coalitions that are needed for progressive social and political change. Her work is crucial to the global literary canon as it provides foundational work about the need to represent Black women's experiences as legitimate and important experiences, understood from a Black woman's viewpoint. My purpose for writing

this thesis is to highlight her work as important to critical discourse about gender, class, race, environment, politics, and life and to illuminate my interests in coalition politics as a way to get beyond separatist identities. bell hooks, in *Remembered Rapture*, notes that Bambara wanted to “challenge and transform the existing structure” (231) that works to silence people of color and to prohibit a more nuanced participation in conversations about the conditions of life and who actually matters within it. Fighting against hegemony, environmental and social racism, capitalism, and imperialism, among other constructs, Bambara creates resistant texts that focus on the problems that disenfranchised communities face and issues that are extremely important to the survival and upkeep of our future world.

Bambara moves away from Western notions about the ways in which Black people understand themselves in relation to an imposed dominant discourse. As she redefines traditional terms, Bambara constructs important work that questions notions of traditional wholeness. Traditional/ colonial/ universal wholeness and the wholeness that I speak of in this piece are different in that traditional ideas of wholeness speak to separated notions of the whole, meaning that only one group of people can sustain and maintain order. I define wholeness as the understanding of the ways in which activism in relation to coalition building, gender politics and environmental justice all work together to achieve a balance that informs Black and Third World life, which in turn, benefits all realms of people. My idea of wholeness confounds traditional ideas of wholeness and illustrates a call to action, one that pushes all people and components to participate in the quest for unity and understanding. This “new” wholeness is a more varied portrait of how mental, social, environmental, political, psychosexual, cultural, and economic realities of Black and Third World people coalesce to help understand the intricate balance that must be achieved for wholeness to come about. In Bambara’s novel, *The Salt Eaters*, Minnie

Ransom, a healer and guide asks the protagonist Velma “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well? ... a lot of weight when you’re well” (3), which speaks to the need for the strength of the mind, body, and spirit, a whole, in order to function as one with all components that are needed for progressive and sustaining qualities within racist, sexist, and environmental danger zones.

Bambara’s fiction, particularly *The Salt Eaters*, coupled with her non-fiction, particularly *The Black Woman*, stands as a testament to the need for consciousness and education in the world, and the need for a comprehensive understanding of the interrelated problems and possibilities of life in and beyond the US. The nonfiction anthology, *The Black Woman*, is an example of straightforward, clear rhetoric about the interconnectedness of all people in the world and the thorough analysis of Black women about Black and Third World life. *The Salt Eaters* is an example of how Bambara best uses literary narrative to validate fiction as a viable and important medium for scholars to understand ideas and forms of meaning as embedded in the everyday lives of people. Both the fiction and the nonfiction depict scenarios that show the power of coalitions and the weakness of separatism. The discourses that Bambara has constructed through her writings are complex analyses of language about Black women and Black communities in the post Civil Rights/Black Power Era. It is, then, my task to show how Bambara turns away from an imposed identity and narrative style to create nontraditional and significant texts that have been missing from critical discourse for far too long.

My close analysis of Bambara will proceed in three chapters, tracing three interlinked themes. The first chapter deals with the unique vision of activism in Bambara’s work that speaks to coalition building. Using rhetoric as activism, juxtaposing the contrasts that exist between coalition politics and separatist politics in her piece “On the Issue of Roles,” Bambara imparts

her exceptional ideas about the need for coalition building in order for real activism to take place. She notes that “The job of purging is staggering. It perhaps takes less heart to pick up the gun than to face the task of creating a new identity, a self, perhaps an androgynous self, via commitment to the struggle” (126). Bambara speaks of a cleansing; the dismantling of Western notions of what it means to be feminine, and what it means to be masculine, what it means to be whole, to reach a medium where the focus can be on the well-being of the community. Bambara rejects notions of separatism on any level, and thus recognizes and criticizes the tension between the Black Power Movement and White feminism, which both have elements of separatism and instead, advocates for a coalition politics that really deals with community. She makes clear that coalitions are the only way to make progressive strides that would aid in liberation for oppressed peoples.

Chapter two delves into Bambara’s commentary about gender politics as she speaks about the Modern Civil Rights Movement and the ways in which men and women interacted. She pays homage to the unspoken women who were in the margins, as men were credited for the majority of work done during the movement. By paying homage to women and analyzing remnants of the post-Movement era, Bambara is clearly constructing a new history that needs to be explored further regarding the Movement and the subjectivity of the people involved across several generations. Her “fictional” account complements and in some areas extends recent historiographic treatments of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement that have belatedly paid closer attention to gender relations. Bambara’s remarks about gender politics are also poignant and she, through her novel *The Salt Eaters*, blatantly attacks patriarchy, and structures that worked to divide Black women and men during the Modern Civil Rights Movement. By assembling a new history about women in the movement, Bambara adds voice to

a history that seldom recognizes the many women who were integral parts in making the progressive strides for the betterment of all underprivileged people. Through flashbacks, memory, and clever negotiations of space and time, Bambara's "fictional" accounts via *The Salt Eaters* provide a cogent depiction of the possibilities that abound when understanding, equal cooperation, and recognition are set forth by all participating parties.

Chapter three closely examines the idea of environmental racism. Long before a movement was documented about environmental issues that plague Black and disenfranchised communities, Bambara was writing and speaking about environmental racism and how it implicitly and explicitly affects the lives of community inhabitants. As among the first writers to address issues of environmental racism, Bambara's ideas about the ways in which waste and destructive chemicals are strategically placed in disenfranchised communities presents issues that have become more and more relevant in recent years. By raising questions and commenting on environmental racism, Bambara pioneers an approach which later took the form of the environmental justice movement, and a wider questioning of corporate structures in communities of color. With *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara uses several characters to show how all people --- young and old, rich and poor, professional and non-professional --- are connected. It is important to read Bambara through this lens because she contributes a great deal to literary ecocriticism and adds a pivotal point about how mistreatment of the environment and people who live within it can be fatal. By showing the links among all people and all facets of community, Bambara comments on the destructive impact of corporate life on disenfranchised communities and how corporate systems work to cause cancer, lung problems, and other diseases in those who live within the communities, no matter their occupation or status in life.

Chapter 1 Activism: Bambara's Rhetoric for Coalition Politics

During the summer between my sophomore and junior years in college, I interned at a community center in East Point, GA that provided GED prep, resume writing, job skills, and aid to women who otherwise would not have had the opportunity. While working at the center, I met a young Black woman who was my age, but visited as a client. As a single mother of two with a tenth grade education, my friend would come to my station and we would talk about life. One day, she said to me “You know we got to stick together, us as young [Black] women and old women, college and no college too I mean. We gotta keep programs like this one to help everybody cause some people know things that other people don't.” This comment highlights several powerful ideas: 1.) a need for Black women of all economic backgrounds and ages to work together, 2.) a need for action to take place so that help is guaranteed for all, and 3.) a desire to understand self and others in order to help the community become a place of nourishment and richness as it should be. As I reflect upon my experiences at my internship, in conjunction with my current research, the need for coalition politics becomes more apparent to me, the need for all types of women and men to work to change the trajectory of living conditions and relationships in oppressed communities. When I read Toni Cade Bambara's 1970 anthology, *The Black Woman*¹, a work that warns against separatist politics, I knew that I had to engage this topic a bit further for my interests were solidified.

As Bambara writes in her introduction, “[there] is a need for unified effort and value of vision of a society substantially better than the existing one,” in order for progressive social and political change to take place; Bambara's introduction provides a rich context that speaks to the need for coalition building --- an idea that moves beyond the old pathologies and approaches to

¹ *The Black Woman* was reissued in 2005, which speaks to its relevance, importance, and potential in and beyond American society. It is one of the earliest and one of the most significant anthologies for women of color feminists.

bettering communities. The nonfiction of Toni Cade Bambara, particularly her work *The Black Woman*, is essential to Black women's rhetoric for coalition politics and provides a new way of thinking about the world and the problems that haunt it. Bambara's work furthers the conversation for and by Black and Third World women, women like the young lady in East Point, GA, and her essay "On the Issue of Roles" in particular works as a purposeful rhetoric that challenges and questions authority for any kind. Bambara takes the conversation a step further by alerting readers of the complexity of "wholeness" and how coalition politics will be crucial to any substantial change. Bambara says that "we must [raise questions and act] if we are to fashion a natural sense of self, if we are to develop harmonious relationships with each other. What are we talking about when we speak of revolution if not a free society made up of whole individuals? I'm not arguing for a denial of manhood or womanhood, but rather a shifting of priorities, a call for Selfhood, Blackhood" ("Roles" 129). This passage shows the relevance of coalitions as ones that go against the status quo to create situations that are significantly better than oppressive structures.

My purpose for this chapter is to highlight the ways in which Bambara advocates for coalition politics as she moves away from separatist ways of knowing and doing to provide insight for and about disenfranchised and Third world people. Bambara's work shows ways in which language can be used to move people in new directions and invites them to engage in meaningful conversation and action about the environment, community, and life conditions. She is not concerned with abstract rhetoric that hinders progress and leads people to believe in a flowery idea about issues that communities face. Rather, Bambara takes on the task of conveying language and information that is concerned with everyday people with ordinary ideals and hopes. Bambara notes that "some of the papers representing groups and individuals are

presented [in this anthology] ... what is immediately noticeable are the distinct placements of stress, for some women are not so much concerned with demanding rights as they are in clarifying issues; some demand rights as Black first, woman second. Oddly enough, it is necessary to point out what should be obvious --- Black women are individuals too” (5). The anthology highlights the need for clarity about issues that affect the lives of Black and Third World women, who in turn, shape many communities. It also stands a resounding voice that tells readers and listeners that Black women are here, and they demand to be heard. This need and demand for understanding, to know about how issues truly influence women, is what I am concerned with because it is the only way for true coalitions to form.

I concur with Bernice Johnson Reagan’s 1981 speech called “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century” because it resonates with Bambara’s sense of the hard work and urgency of coalitions:

We are positioned to have the opportunity to have something to do with what makes it into the next century. And the principles of coalition are directly related to that. You don’t go into coalition politics because you just like it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody could possibly kill you, is because that’s the only way you can figure you can stay alive (356-57).

This passage shows that coalitions are not fancy meetings that are put together for people to just talk and talk back. What happens in a coalition is that people are mobilized and called to action to work together, to stick together, and to help each other make more of their respective situations. It also shows that coalitions are hard work and that one cannot simply make change overnight. Reagan’s speech, written some ten years after Bambara’s anthology, echoes Bambara’s call for alliances between all disenfranchised women who have been severely

impacted by the environmental racism and hegemonic forces of western thought. Bambara writes, in the Preface to *The Black Woman* that her purpose for compiling such a remarkable anthology grew out of irritation with a feminist movement that did not include a broad enough assortment of women's experiences, especially those experiences of women of color (5). Concerned not only with the US, but the critical ways in which other women internationally (and supporters of women's rights) have been left in the margins is significant to highlight as it shows her cognizance about diasporic communities and her desire to build coalitions for the betterment of society.

Bambara is the author of three pieces that appear in the anthology, *The Black Woman*. Of the three, "On the Issue of Roles" is by far the piece that speaks most fully to her work as an activist rhetorician. In the beginning paragraphs of "Roles," Bambara argues that Black and Third World Women need to take control of their lives in order to make progressive strides for the betterment of their communities. Bambara notes that "if there is any area that is crucial to Black Studies or Third World Curriculum it is the study of the destructive and corruptive white presence. We think we know; we feel we've been sensitized long enough to really know. But we really ought to check it out with thoroughness" (127). Bambara recognizes that colonial realities of slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, among other happenings, all have a generational affect that creates problems for victims and descendents of victims from the mentioned occurrences. By focusing her work on women of color, Bambara posits that an understanding of history and its aftermath is needed in order to take the steps to combat problems and that women must become subjects of learning the guiding principles that have shaped institutionalized racism, classism, and gender issues. The creative and forceful uses of rhetoric echoes the idea of radical politics, coalition politics, which is needed to combat the problems that fester because of such a

gloomy past. The colonial ideas of what it means to be black, to be a woman, to be a woman of color, to be an activist, are questioned in Bambara's work as she problematizes imposed identities and calls for a creation of new identities within new coalitions. Similar to my conversation with the young woman while working in East Point, Bambara speaks to how understanding and action are needed to make coalitions possible.

Bambara says that "I am beginning to see, especially lately, that the usual notions of sexual differentiation in roles is an obstacle to political consciousness, that the way those terms are generally defined and acted upon in this part of the world is a hindrance to full development. And that is a shame, for a revolution must be capable of, above all, total self-autonomy" (124). Bambara sets up a scenario that rhetorically challenges the idea of imposed identities, and places Black and Third World subject positions at the center of an ongoing, collective process. She notes that one's independence is needed in order for that person to possess any mode by which to understand themselves in relation to the world. Bambara argues that in order to engage in the idea of true selfhood and progression, understanding one's own subjectivity is a critical concept as it provides a direct link between the person and the community. Jacqueline Jones Royster, in "When the First Voice you Hear is Not Your Own," provides a relevant definition for subjectivity, "subjectivity as a defining value pays attention dynamically to context, ways of knowing, language abilities, and experience, and by doing so it has a consequent potential to deepen, broaden, and enrich our interpretive views in dynamic ways as well" (611). Subjectivity, then, is the vessel by which community members have the potential to better themselves because they will be equipped with the consciousness and understanding about how to negotiate at least a portion of what Bambara calls "self-autonomy" ("Roles" 124). Royster's idea of "ways of knowing" echoes Bambara's desire for people to understand foundations of

language and community; she vies for people to understand their own subjectivity and all of the components that make possible a new start that will allow disenfranchised communities to make meaningful identities for themselves. This fits the mold of my original thoughts of coalitions, as my friend suggested that “some people know things that other people don’t,” and if all people are able to put their heads together to make a unified effort, the community would be transformed into a helpful grassroots variety.

Beverly Guy-Sheftall, in her piece “Toni Cade Bambara, Black Feminist Foremother” acknowledges her personal experience with Bambara and the way in which the author works as an activist rhetorician who is cognizant of constituents in and beyond the United States. Guy-Sheftall notes:

When I inquired about the possibility of Black and other Third World women forming alliances around the eradication of both race and gender oppression, Toni revealed her involvement in what we would now call a global women’s movement ... She believed that feminist movements should not be narrowly focused on the evils of patriarchy but rather on eliminating all oppressions, including that experienced in colonized Third World and poor people in the United States. (117)

Bambara’s ideas about the possibilities of underprivileged voices are paramount to understanding her as a rhetorical activist. She aspires to dismantle oppression in regards to race, class, gender and all social ills that come together to hinder groups of people. She furthers the conversation by advocating for women and all oppressed people, *internationally*. By inviting a multiplicity of voices to be added to the discussion about a new wave of feminism, Bambara does not mimic the patriarchy that is often inflicted upon women. Calling for a new form of feminism is a rhetorical move as it shifts the focus of the feminist movement to an all

encompassing coalition. Her notion of truth also builds cross-cultural communication that is needed to bridge the gap that exists between women of color so that alliances can be formed.

Author bell hooks cites “On the Issue of Roles” as a catalyst for critically engaging conversation about the capitalist patriarchy that analyze relations among race, class, and gender from a Womanist perspective (*Remembered Rapture* 230). hooks’ idea is important as she positions Bambara as the woman who paved the way for her own ability to write and talk about those complex issues as they relate to black women. In that way, it is understood that Bambara provides the language and the space for which all women can come to speak about problems that inhabit the community and the actions that must be taken so that the problems are eradicated. hooks’ first book, *Ain’t I A Woman*, outlines Bambara’s ideas about what needs to happen for a community to gain wholeness:

Teaching women how to defend themselves against male rapists is not the same as working to change society so that men will not rape. Establishing houses for battered women do not change the psyches of men who batter them, nor does it change the culture that condones and promotes brutality ... Demanding an end to institutionalized sexism does not ensure an end to sexist oppression. (191)

The above passage speaks to a deeper way of thinking about labels in American society --- a need to look at the foundations of oppression --- that hooks traces to Toni Cade Bambara’s pioneering work “On the Issue of Roles.” It also speaks to the way in which all people, including oppressors, are negatively affected by systems of power. The fact that hooks associates herself with Bambara’s work is critical to understand because it solidifies Bambara as an influential rhetorician who has had an impact on at least two generations of scholar activists.

Savoring the Salt: The Legacy of Toni Cade Bambara is another work that shows just how Bambara's words and actions as a rhetorician have informed the lives of writers, film artists, scholars, and community members. Edited by Linda Holmes and Cheryl Wall, the anthology includes a myriad of writings by different thinkers who have been influenced by Bambara's language and work. The editor's note that:

The weave of voices creates a stunning tapestry [in this anthology]. The voice that links them all is Bambara's own. In each section, she speaks first. Her words are excerpted from her writings and from speeches that she made throughout her life ... Bambara's initial statement explains the image that we have chosen for our title. Salt as an antidote for poison, a component of tears and of humor, became for Bambara a metaphor to be endlessly mined. (6)

The anthology is the only one of its kind and stands as a testament to the work needed to understand Bambara's complex efforts to imagine and embody progressive change. It also works to reiterate Bambara's call for true coalition building in order for cross-cultural communication to be effective to allow a transformative action to take place.

Some, however, may view Bambara's work as a utopian vision of how the world can change for the better. Avery Gordon's piece, "Something More Powerful than Skepticism" provides information about Bambara's attitude about the idea of her writing as a utopian vision. She cites an interview that Bambara had with Kay Bonetti who asks "Would you be comfortable being called something like a utopian writer? Being seen in that tradition?" and Bambara says:

Oh, absolutely not! No, I don't identify myself with utopian literature ... it doesn't attempt to look at this new society as a historical continuum and I find that a little stupid. And finally the most characteristic feature is it's very futuristic looking. I'm also future

oriented, but it has to do with memory, with what I know is possible because it already happened ... No, I wouldn't identify myself as a utopian writer. (257)

The western idea of utopian thought, then, is what Bambara works to avoid to the extent that it misunderstands foundational histories and thus, makes it unable to relay a clear sense of the past. In the interview, Bambara says that she knows history and is interested in the possibilities of the future, but that her approach differs much from a utopian vision of the world in that it incorporates memory, something needed to move forward. Bambara's vision is in tune and invites readers and workers to remember the past in order to liberate themselves and to think outside of traditional notions of being.

In her work, "Black English," Bambara raises initiatives about language that reverberate in "On the Issues of Roles." She says that "in schools we do not emphasize the real function of language in our lives: how it operates in courts, in hospitals, in schools, in the media, how it operates to perpetuate a society, maintain a social order, to reflect biases, to transmit basic values" (78). Bambara's idea about how language speaks to wholeness and subjectivity as it invites readers to participate in analyzing the ways in which society has created roles to maintain social order. She notes that "we have been programmed to depend on white models or white interpretations of nonwhite models ... Perhaps we need to face the terrifying and overwhelming possibility that there are no models, that we shall have to create from scratch" ("Roles" 133). Bambara's call is one for revolution --- one that uses language to convey the need for a dismantling of patriarchal related hierarchies. Her point about "no models" is crucial as it calls people to put aside biases in order to remedy problems that were caused by patriarchal models (patriarchal in the larger sense that includes all social hierarchies). Bambara's rhetorical invitation to the betterment of society applies to all who are interested in the possibilities of new

ideas --- ideas that deviate from the dominant rhetoric that upholds languages of exclusion based on race, class, and gender. Thus, Bambara rejects any type of separatism that could hinder progress and promotes a stance of openness.

Similarly, Bambara references Frantz Fanon's work *A Dying Colonialism* in "Roles" and I think that connection helps to bring some clarity to her point about selfhood and understanding subjectivity. Fanon's work, which is about Algerian liberation from colonialism, provides Bambara with a critical lens through which to assert her feelings about breaking away from ideologies that work to define a group of people. She notes that Fanon's chapter about the Algerian family "clearly demonstrates both the possibility and the necessity for creating new values and new persons" (132). Her understanding of Fanon's work shows her serious study of how Black and Third World communities can change priorities to arrive at a clearer notion of what it means to achieve wholeness. Bambara notes that, "a new person is born when he finds a value to define an actual self and when he can assume autonomy for that self. Such is the task that faces us" (133). Selfhood, therefore, is Bambara's plea as she uses Fanon's work to apply a new way of thinking about priorities, of using rhetoric to invite other cultures to enter a conversation that questions patriarchal roles in society. This questioning is important because the act within itself speaks to a type of critical selfhood --- independently recognizing that there is a problem. Bambara's ability to relay the idea of selfhood is bold and strategic as she uses forceful language to show the power of words and how they can be used to gather the needed attention to engage in solutions to change the old rhetoric that disenfranchises groups of people.

Fanon's work about the family posits the idea of an alternative rhetoric, one that Bambara extends in "On the Issue of Roles." In chapter three of *A Dying Colonialism*, Fanon says that "tradition, in fact, is not solely a combination of automatic gestures and archaic beliefs. At the

most elementary level, there are values, and the need for justification” (100). The quote brings up the need for a reevaluation of priorities and for Bambara, Fanon’s work is useful in helping us to negotiate and understand how that shifting can take place when a group gains selfhood and understands that separatism will accomplish nothing. Bambara’s claim expands the thoughts of Fanon and other postcolonial theories by noting that “revolution begins with the self, in the self ... we need to reject too the opinions of outside ‘experts’ who love to explain ourselves to ourselves ... it may be lonely. Certainly painful. It’ll take time. We’ve got time ... We’d better take the time to fashion revolutionary selves, revolutionary lives, revolutionary relationships” (133). This view posits that there is a possibility for those who have been affected by colonialism to make needed change by creating new models to follow. The idea of making a new self to make a solid whole speaks to coalitions politics.

Bambara’s goal of creating an self-autonomous rhetoric may be questioned in light of Kenneth Burke’s contention in *A Rhetoric of Motives* that “you can persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, idea, identifying your ways with his” (55). Burke’s analysis of identification is interesting to note in relation to Bambara’s work as she was not received well by mainstream society. Although her works have had a strong impact on a portion of the left, especially given that hers was one of the first books to address the post civil rights issues of feminism and Black women, Bambara’s work seemed to be too revolutionary for a mainstream audience. My friend at the East Point Community center said that “we got to stick together, us as young women and old women, college and no college too I mean,” and her ideas are parallel to Bambara’s sentiments. Bambara argues for broad coalitions, but knows they must grow from finely nurtured grass roots. Bambara’s accessible work calls for women of color to get their act together personally as complicated communities

before being in a position to engage wider communities. While Bambara furthers the conversation that invites people to understand their own subjectivity so that they may be comfortable with themselves and others --- so that they may acknowledge other cultures --- her text is accessible, to people who are willing to listen to alternative thoughts. Burke's idea of identification, then, is useful to understand Bambara's invitation to enrich community, but cannot be used to move too quickly to universal levels.

Krista Ratcliffe's *Rhetorical Listening* provides useful commentary about how listening to one another can provide the type of coalitions for which Bambara speaks. *Rhetorical Listening* argues that "discourses are invisible to the human eye and yet may simultaneously permeate multiple bodies as when millions of people view a movie ... depending on a person's psychical and historical cultural location" (69). Ratcliffe's point reminds us that socioeconomic status, background, and gender, play a huge part in discourse communities. If one is unable to identify or relate to another's background, then that individual immediately cuts himself or herself off from the conversation. Thus, Ratcliffe posits a need for metaphors to be used so that differences and commonalities can be embraced. It must be said that Bambara's work highlights the need for different communities to work together to recognize differences and commonalities in order to reach a lucid product, but people who engage the text and each other must listen to engage in a fruitful communicative discourse. Ratcliffe's text states that non-identification "signifies a place where two concepts are metonymically juxtaposed --- that is, where concepts of the negative and of identification are associated but not overlapping" (72). Non-identification indicates no real communication. Identification, then, must be made in order to charter a new road. Bambara's work stands as a testament to the ways in which identification and metaphor are important in order to establish meaningful and purposeful connections with the environment and

within communities; however, Bambara makes clear that an identifying self and subjectivity must be achieved before any other real and constructive “listening” can take place. Women of color and Third World women must come together to focus on creating alliances that could help form a new healthier, social and intellectual paradigm that gives voice to the voiceless and provides a means for which women to unite. When these particular disenfranchised women unite, they are able to bond on commonalties and differences that have kept them from achieving wholeness.

Bambara ends “On the Issue of Roles” by saying that “if your house ain’t in order, you ain’t in order. It is much easier to be out there than right here. The revolution ain’t out there. Yet. But it is here. Should be. And arguing that instant-coffee-ten-minutes-to-midnight alibi to justify hasty-headed dealings with your mate is shit. Ain’t no such animal as an instant guerilla” (135). Bambara’s rhetoric here is palpable as it clearly calls out to the reader --- making him or her accountable for the material presented. In this way, Bambara’s rhetoric works as activism that questions, probes, and demands that readers and doers work to eradicate complacency and rise up to be about business. Relationships that are formed when readers and doers are about business are political relationships, ones that could be the beginnings of a coalition. She foreshadows her fictional text, *The Salt Eaters*, where if one does not get their stuff together, an explosion will occur that would not work in the person’s or the community’s favor. This powerful ending to “Roles” is a testament to Bambara’s abilities to tell the truth with staunch, unwavering power! It is also evidence of her ability to use everyday language in order to convey issues that affect everyday people. Bambara is no respecter of hierarchies or isolated personhood because she believes that all people need each other to truly survive as sisters and brothers in this world, but she in no way suggests that overcoming differences will be easy.

My initial exposure to the idea of coalition building that was initiated by my friend as I interned at an East Point Community Center is even more relevant to me as I understand it as a grassroots theory about the importance of community coalition work which, as Bernice Reagan reminds us, can be the choice that makes the difference between life or death (356). However, by critically engaging Bambara's "On the Issue of Roles" coupled with my friend's idea of "working together," it is understood that critical discourse and action about alliances and community practices must happen for all levels of people as the conversation alerts readers and doers of the intricacies of wholeness and how coalition politics will be a fundamental tool for any considerable change to take place.

Chapter 2 Gender Politics in *The Salt Eaters*

In her novel *The Salt Eaters*, Toni Cade Bambara embodies Black feminism/womanism as she analyses radicalized gender politics, especially between Black men and Black women, in order to comment on the relationships in and around the Modern Civil Rights Movement. Bambara's character choices, specifically centering on Black women committed to progressive change, says much about her important decision to humanize Black people and Black women, those who are dedicated to finding and implementing that crucial element that has been "missing from the mix" (*The Salt Eaters* 259). As the central character Velma struggles throughout *The Salt Eaters* to get well, Bambara places several characters in scenarios that help to negotiate issues of politics, economics, and power. Bambara also uses Velma and these characters to discuss problems as she toys with space and time to "rewrite" the history associated with leaders and the struggle for liberation during the Modern Civil Rights Era. She also moves away from separatist notions of liberation, wholeness, and gender, creating a clever plea for coalition politics that will help make progressive strides toward the betterment of political, social, environmental, and mental wholeness. Although there are many vantage points from which one could engage such a rich novel, the ways in which Toni Cade Bambara constructs gender politics in *The Salt Eaters* is crucial.

Many scholars have touched on the importance and relevance of *The Salt Eaters*, especially in terms of its non-linear, postmodern form, or its historical references, but little attention has been called toward its gender politics. Elliott Butler-Evans makes this claim clear in *Race, Gender, and Desire*, when he examines the lenses through which scholars have chosen to access the novel. He notes, "critical studies...have focused primarily on the structure of the novel and its cultural historical references...such approaches seem to avoid facing the complex

issues generated by the novel's representations of gender politics, subordinating that concern to a racial discourse" (171-72). Here, it is evident that, for critics, the concept of gender politics in the novel has been swept under the rug in favor of racial politics. But submerging gender politics in racial politics is precisely what *The Salt Eaters* warns against. So, while gender politics to Bambara are always intertwined with race, class and other factors, this chapter will examine gender dynamics in her retelling of the history of the Modern Civil Rights Era. However, this cannot be done without first understanding the role of Black feminism and the place it has in this novel.

Feminism, in general, includes issues surrounding the financial status of women and issues connected to women's poverty, educational opportunities, employment policies, owning property, political rights, and the like (Hill-Collins 66). For the most part, feminism in the United States is categorized by two waves, both of which include struggles for freedom and equality by and for African American women (Taylor 235). During the abolitionist Movement (1830-1865), many Black women were deemed property of white slave owners. As Ula Taylor notes, "[Both] 'free' and enslaved Black women created numerous strategies and tactics to dismantle slavery as a legal institution and resist racially gendered sexual abuse" (235). She goes on to argue that much controlling work was done to exclude Black women from the process of achieving equality. Taylor exclaims that, "Elizabeth Cady Stanton's ... willingness to manipulate Black womanhood to meet the needs of White women helped to generate the unsisterly legacy between White and Black women" (237). Taylor is alluding to the first wave of feminism and the ways in which Black women and White women worked together for equality, but in which White women's voices were dominating and not necessarily for the benefit of Black women.

In this context of the second wave of feminism, Black women, as a group, developed a new consciousness. Taylor writes:

Black women's collective consciousness evolved during the second wave of feminism ...the second wave of feminism was linked to the Modern Civil Rights Movement (which is often dated from the 1954 [Brown v. Board of Education] decision ...) and the enforcement, during the 1970s ... of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Despite the fact that most celebrated leaders of the Modern Civil Rights Movement were men, African American Women participated in every stage in the struggle for justice and equality. (239)

Despite a history of betrayal, Black feminism serves as that unwavering voice that problematizes issues within the Black community and the larger world to help the disenfranchised. Patricia Hill-Collins in *Fighting Words*, notes that "In the United States, the term *Black feminism* also disrupts the racism inherent in presenting feminism as a for-White-only ideology and political movement" (67). In "On the Issue of Roles," Bambara argues that an exclusive look at Black womanhood is worthwhile to end ideologies that speak for Black women, but do not include Black women as researchers. She asks, "how relevant are the truths, the experiences, the findings of white women to Black women? Are women after all simply women? I don't know that our priorities are the same, or even similar enough so that we can afford or depend on this new field of experts (white, female)" (4). Bambara raises the point that not only Black women, but women of color, domestically and internationally, are fully capable of representing themselves and should work to adopt a Black feminist aesthetic as a vehicle for transporting and relaying the possibilities of truth that lie in the myriad of experiences that Black women possess.

Bambara's gender analysis stresses the need for both Black men and women to work together, to understand and "be aware of the myriad forms of power" (Brock, 12). Butler–Evans notes that "The critique of the past that reads male-dominance and duplicity as aspects of traditional nationalist politics becomes an ideologeme of the broader feminist discourse of the novel" (180). It is clear that Bambara shows ways in which Black men were able to project their voices and be heard, but too often at the expense of Black women who were ever-present in the struggle. In addition to using a Black feminist approach, Bambara embraces what Alice Walker later called a Womanist aesthetic. Womanism speaks to a person who is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (*In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* xi), and the environment in which they live. The Womanist approach is one that "supplies a way for Black women to address gender oppression without attacking Black men" (Collins 63), and it draws on Bambara's notion of environment as a pivotal portion of life for all people. Moreover, Bambara successfully comments about gender politics without embracing male bashing that can potentially be used by racists and embraces what is now called a Womanist aesthetic that represents wholeness. My analysis of gender politics, then, will focus on *The Salt Eaters* as a text that eloquently speaks to gender dynamics between Black men and Black women during the Modern Civil Rights Era, and how they cope with a legacy of gender inequality years after.

The complex gender politics in *The Salt Eaters* can be accessed in many ways, but Velma Henry clearly serves as one key access point in which to engage key themes. When readers meet her in the community of Claybourne, Georgia, she is in the care of a healer named Minnie Ransom. As the healer nurses Velma back to health, Velma inhabits two spaces, her present in the Southwest Community Infirmary and her past working in the Civil Rights Movement. By juxtaposing history and the present condition, the novel is participating in what Linda Hutcheon

in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, calls “historiographic metafiction” (5). This term deals with the “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (5). Bambara is reworking a history that her human construct, Velma, is self-aware of, in order to make sense of what it means to define and assert one’s self to a cause. In Velma’s case, the cause was uplifting the Black community, and through participating in the Civil Rights Movement, she worked hard to establish justice and equality. The gender dynamic within the history that Velma tells is one that shows Black women at the center but unacknowledged as central.

The Civil Rights Movement was a call to action to provide equality and liberation, in all realms, for people of color in the United States of America. The movement helped to liberate and influence people from countries in the continent of Africa, Latin America and many other places in the Third World. Groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, all encompassed both men and women members, but with the males most of often as figureheads and presidents. Because the men were, most of the time, seen at the forefront of activities, Bambara emphasizes that Black women were a big part of the Movement. Through Velma’s memory, Bambara parodies this history, magnifying the important element of gender issues. Hutcheon argues that parody is “a perfect postmodern form ... [that] forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin and originality ... it has been seen by postmodern artists as a liberating challenge to a definition of subjectivity and creativity” (11). Here, it can be inferred that Bambara is contesting what constitutes truth and epistemology. Through parody, she carves the Black woman a space in

commentary regarding the Movement, thus debunking an imposed view of self, i.e. of Black women. For example, Butler-Evans alludes to the scene when Velma is juxtaposed with “the speaker” at the Gulf Station at the end of a boycott in which she and her group marched. Menstruating, with swollen feet and having endured both physical and verbal attacks, Velma’s march to her destination is very vivid. In contrast, “the speaker” arrives in a “black sleek limousine; [“the speaker”] looked a bit like King, had a delivery similar to Malcolm’s, dresses like Rap, but she never heard him say anything useful or offensive. What a voice” (35). Velma narrates her experiences, listening to the speaker, who says nothing useful and did not march or go through the aforementioned pain that the crowd suffered, to point out how men were seen as the main leaders and workers of the organizations, while women often did the toughest, dirtiest and most crucial work. Butler-Evans notes that, “immediately after this parody of a speaker/leader, the novel returns to Velma’s ordeal in the bathroom” (179). Bambara writes, “And no soap. No towels. No tissue. No Machine. Just a spurt then a trickle of rusty water in a clogged sink then no water at all. And like a cat she’d have to lick herself clean of grit, salt, blood, and rage” (36). Butler-Evans goes on to say that placing these two images together “not only demythologizes the male figure, but shows Velma to be heroic and the person with true political commitment” (179). Through parody, Bambara takes on a liberating tone, using Velma to represent the fortitude that Black women had in the Movement, and must continue to possess in order to achieve real justice and equality as it relates to humanization. She does not debunk the fact that Black men were involved, but Bambara does feel the need to acknowledge that Black women had much to do with the Movement, and so much of this record by the Civil Rights Movement’s historiography has confirmed this fact.

Vicki Crawford, in her article “Beyond the Human Self: Grassroots Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movements” speaks about the ways in which Black women were overlooked, even within the organizations that were fighting for justice. She reminds readers that “with few exceptions, most accounts of [The Civil Rights] period focus on male leaders and the organizations that they led. Very little is known about the countless black women who were the backbone of ... the struggle” (13). Bambara challenges this fact by allowing Velma to recall her experiences as a Black woman committed to positive social change. By, as Butler Evans says, “demythologizing” notions of what and whom the Movement encompassed, Bambara rewrites a male oriented history, portraying women as pivotal to the struggle. Anne Standley, in “The Role of Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement,” notes that “men were the principal leaders of the Civil Rights Movement ... yet, in fact, women exerted an enormous influence, both formally ... and informally as spontaneous leaders and dedicated participants” (184). When Velma misses work at the Academy, it is evident how she was such an important part of the work load. The text says that, “Velma had run the office, done the books, handled the payroll, supervised the office staff, saw to it that they were not overlooked as a resource for seminars, conferences, and trips, wrote the major proposals and did most of the fundraising” (93). The text goes on to note that it took approximately five people to fulfill the duties that Velma completed when she was forced to leave work because of illness. This history of women in the movement, one that Bambara speaks of, is important to understanding the ways in which gender politics are such a key element in Bambara’s novel.

Another instance in *The Salt Eaters* looks specifically at groups that were committed to obtaining equality, but did not allow women to participate fully. Velma Henry’s godmother, Sophie Heywood, another strong figure in the novel, is one who recalls the history of gender

politics in the Movement. The novel informs readers that “Sophie Heywood [was] chapter president of the Women’s Auxiliary of the Sleeping Car Porters” (12). With this, readers are able to see that an Auxiliary group was created for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BHSP), a labor union organized by the predominantly Black Pullman Porters in the USA. The BHSP predates the times in which the novel negotiates, but it is important to note that this group, committed to remedying economic disparities, created a sub-group composed of women, for which Sophie was the president. The connotation of an auxiliary group automatically denotes a secondary standing. Thus, within the BHSP, men and women were not on the same playing field. Nonetheless, the novel notes that Sophie was like a mentor for the women in the community and taught her advisees about the need for finding purpose, no matter the place or circumstance.

“Find meaning where you’re put, Vee” (7) is what Sophie Heywood always told Velma and her students. Thus, Sophie used her position as Auxiliary president, although it was secondary, as best she could in order to further what she knew to be right. She instilled this same ideology into her students, who, in other organizations, magnified meaning to include freedom and the possibility of liberation for both men and women, on equal terms. As a result, students of Sophie stood up for what they believed and challenged the men. Velma spoke at one of the meetings by saying “we need to be clear, all of us, about the nature of the work. About how things have gotten done in the past and why that pattern has to change” (31). Here, Velma is highlighting the need for both men and women to work on equal terms within the organization to achieve a wholeness that could make the community more vibrant and more useful. Ruby, another student, goes on to say, “It boils down to this. You jokers ... never want to take responsibility for getting down. ... Now, what that has meant in the past is that we women have

been expected to carry the load” (31). With these comments, Ruby is giving recognition to the fact that women were huge parts of inducing change, and that the men neglected to acknowledge this fact. Ruby exclaims that women have done more work than men have. One of the men in the group, Patterson, exclaimed “Well, I for one have always been most appreciative of your input, most grateful for the work that you ladies have done, most ...” (31). Before Patterson could finish his sentiments, Velma added that he had certainly been the most “insensitive” (31). With this, readers are able to see the ways in which Black women felt about their involvement in organizations and the ways in which men treated them for their involvement. The gender politics within this scene are evident as rifts about how the business of the organization is run are highlighted by both the men and the women. Although so much work was being done by women, men were numb to the significant changes that the women generated. The women within this organization were arguing for a change; they wanted the men to look at the ravishing effects that excluding women from having equality within the organization could have. The women call for coalition politics because they wanted a wholeness that included all voices that focus on a common goal. The Black men in the novel were overcompensating for their oppressed positions to the detriment of Black women.

“The Movement was redefined from the outside” (91) proclaims the narrator in *The Salt Eaters*. This statement shows how outside forces were responsible for how the Civil Rights Movement was depicted to the world and how Black men were made to accept certain leaders for their respective civil rights organizations. Showing one-sided images of the Movement and everyone who played a key part was a total distortion of just how things were in that time. *The Salt Eaters* makes known that the “whole” picture must be shown in order for true understanding about an event or culture can take place. When Obie, Velma’s husband, is confronted with

change for his Academy, an important place in the city of Claybourne, the narrator notes that outside forces caused a rift in the plan. The text notes:

And so the Spring Festival had been designed as a holding action, way to reconcile the camps, to encourage everyone to work together until the plan could be put to them. But then the hotheads had brought the guns into the place and the splits widened and Obie had not moved quickly enough, been forceful enough, was overcome with ambivalence. Obie felt the image of himself coming apart in Ahiro's hands. 'Have to be whole to see whole,' Mrs. Heywood had counseled them. (92)

The Spring Festival was supposed to be the gathering where people are called to action. Obie's dilemma in this scene arises because outside forces have invaded his space, causing him to panic. Because his Academy was being dictated "from the outside," Obie was left with the lingering wisdom about wholeness that Mrs. Heywood would always impart, but he could not act on his feelings. By showing the amalgamation of different people in the communities who attempted to fulfill different obligations and duties for the Academy, the interconnectedness of people is shown and how it is important for wholeness to abound; Bambara shows how important it is for coalitions to coalesce. The interesting point to note here is the failure of the men at the academy to bring about effective change on their own. Bambara shows, through this scene with Obie, how separatist politics do not produce meaningful, and health results. The consequences that were generated from Obie's action (or lack of action) produced stagnation. By showing how outside forces disrupt wholeness, Bambara shows how gender oppression is systemic and is caused by hegemonic order.

Chantal Mouffe looks to the ways in which ideologies are placed upon a people and this is evident from Obie's case at the Academy. She notes that "tradition allows us to think our own

insertion into historicity, the fact that we are constructed as subjects through a series of already existing discourses, and that it is through this tradition which forms us that the world is given to us and all political action is made” (qtd. in Hogue 3). Mouffe brings up a good point about hegemony and the fact that disenfranchisement is about an existing structure. And in *The Salt Eaters*, the structure includes the Academy and the Spring Festival as the force that works to change the existing structure but are still stuck in it. What is important to note about depiction of the existing structure at this point is the need to change the existing discourse, something that Obie is too overwhelmed with, something that he could not accomplish alone. Thus, one must understand tradition, and understand that gender problems and separatism are elements that people must move past in order to see the truth. Lawrence W. Hogue points out, however, that people of color were forced to conceptualize norms that were given by hegemonic forces that rule the world. He notes that “in this objectified and homogenized conception of tradition, that racial cultural nationalists in the United States fall into a trap of taking rhetorical ideological construct of continuity (and unity and wholeness) as being an essential relation of the community” (3). False “unity” and false “wholeness” are traps, and other kinds of unity and wholeness are possible, ones that don’t exclude or play into hegemony and separatism between genders and cultures. Thus, strategic measures must be taken so that possibilities for truth can abound and coalitions can be made.

In another section of the novel, Bambara, through Velma, speaks candidly about gender politics, this time specifically within an organization in Claybourne that has committed its work to making change. Within this scene, it seems as if the men, again, in the organization had become complacent, and were not participating to their full potential. In a meeting, the women spoke out. Spokeswoman Ruby announced, “Drinking at the bar is all we’ve witnessed yet. You

all say we need a conference, we book the hotel and set it up and yawl drink at the bar ...We caucus, vote, lay out resolutions, yawl drink at the bar. We're trying to build a union, a guild, and organization. You all are welcome to continue operating as a social club, but not on our time ...” (37). Here, it is evident that the women in the organization were about the business of liberating people from oppressive ideologies and making them think on new levels. The women, in this particular scene, provided the men with an ultimatum. They could either help or leave. The crossroads in which the men found themselves was a good place because it warranted the ability to choose. Bambara cleverly weaves this theme of choices into the gender role commentary because it is an important aspect that people of color did not have, blatantly during slavery and Jim Crow. There was another more physiological oppression that the women understood, one that the novel pleads for all people to understand. After Ruby's appeal, Velma exclaimed, “We're at the crossroads, and what we decide tonight will be ... decisive. It is not just a matter of who's taken responsibility in the past for carrying out the work, for getting the press releases, the mailings, for doing the canvassing ...” (39). Bambara allows Velma to leave her thought open-ended, but what can be inferred by this is the need for action; the need for the Black men to listen and understand what the Black women really have to say about liberation, about freedom, about anything, the same way that Black women listen to men. What is also implied is the need to press forward; to work from their current positions to make progressive strides to a new beginning.

In her essay, “On the Issue of Roles,” Bambara gets to the heart of what she means by liberation for people of color, specifically Black people. Bambara asserts:

I have always, I think, opposed the stereotypic definitions of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, not only because I thought it was a lot of merchandised nonsense, but rather because I

always found the either/or implicit in those definitions antithetical to what I was all about—and what a revolution for self is all about--- the whole person. And I am beginning to see ... that the usual notions of sexual differentiation in roles [male and female] is an obstacle to political consciousness, that the way those terms are generally defined and acted upon in this part of the world is a hindrance of full development. (123-24)

This paragraph exudes power as it digs into the core of gender politics, proclaiming that the very structure is one of division in order to keep one group as less than another. What Bambara gets to with the women saying to the men in *The Salt Eaters*, “we are at a crossroads” comes down to the men being challenged to understand that in order to make a real difference, understanding, wholeness, and coalitions are required. In order for that wholeness to become what the word entails, equal parts, both women and men must come together to respect each other’s point of view and to gain a collective understanding about the problems that they both face. The latter portion of Bambara’s statement alludes to this failure to work together as a “hindrance” to the development and to the cause of reaching full liberation and full potential of a people, not a gender, but a people that have been oppressed by interlocking systems of racism, sexism, classism, and the like. Bambara challenges the notion of the imposed roles of masculinity and femininity, looking instead to the possibilities of a group in its entirety.

While clearly woman-centered, a number of Black male characters permeate *The Salt Eaters*, most of whom seem to be rather promising characters in terms of coming into a consciousness about wholeness. But there is one character who really stands out as a man who works to dehumanize Black women. An extreme case of gender inequality is evident when Bambara portrays Roland, the brother of Obie, Velma’s husband. Roland is a predator that has

violated a woman because of his selfish desires. By doing so, he denies efforts made by those who are committed to community uplift. When Obie goes to visit his brother Roland in prison, the conversation is shown from both perspectives. Roland says:

They got me up here mopping floors, bro. She'd been mopping up her own blood with the mop Roland had threatened her with, taken from her, and hit her with, surprising her from the garage window. Mopping up her own blood when the police arrived. A Black woman, forty-six years old, four children, her husband in the reserves for nine days. Roland climbing in the window, stepping over bikes, skateboards, stacks of comics, a burnt-out TV. She'd been in the kitchen mopping the floor. Roland had sent him newspaper clippings. (96)

Here, readers get a sense of a problem that Bambara is articulating through this scene, rape. With the rape scene, Bambara is calling for conversations about issues that plague the community. It shows the consequences of bad choices that can come about at the crossroads if understanding and nurturing does not take place within the community, which is a personal problem as well as a political problem. By raping an unnamed Black woman, Roland is asserting a type of power over her that Bambara abhors. In *The Black Woman*, she speaks a little more about how these types of gender politics are problematic for growth, and how they must be addressed in order to combat the problem. Bambara says "I don't know what the long-range program was regarding sex, but I tend to agree that celibacy for a time is worth considering, for sex is dirty if all it means is winning a man, conquering a woman, beating someone out of something, abusing each other's dignity in order to prove that I am a man, a woman" (129). By adding the scene with Roland into *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara is problematizing this "conquering" mode of thinking and making a plea for it to be addressed. Bambara continues that, "we have

such a reluctance to talk about things like these for fear of being weird. But if we are serious, we shall have to check out everything that is a characteristic of the Black Community and examine it for health or disease” (129). This is an important question that echoes the question that Minnie Ransom asks Velma in the very beginning of the novel “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?” (1). Readers can see that it’s not just about getting well, but wellness as a metaphor for the entire community. Wellness is the thread that binds the novel. In order to reach cohesion and a sense of wholeness, cooperation and equality needs to abound, as well as an understanding about the systemic oppression that invades the community. Wellness means a willingness to analyze the imposed unity by particular political positions, whether they are Black Nationalist or White feminist.

Bambara notes that, “We’re so turned around about Western models, we don’t even know how to raise the correct questions. But raise them we must if we are to fashion a natural sense of self, if we are to develop harmonious relationships with each other ... I’m not arguing for the denial of manhood or womanhood, but rather a shifting of priorities, a call for Selfhood, Blackhood” (*The Black Woman*, 129). Thus, Bambara is calling for unity within the communities, which is connected to her theme of wholeness in *The Salt Eaters* and gender politics within it. She is blatantly challenging the problems that thrive betwixt Black men and women. By showing these problems, Bambara hopes that people are able to come to terms with the issues and work toward a new possibility. And too, she is calling for a united front so that gender is not an issue, but one entity that can be embraced and welcomed on even terms. By amalgamating and joining forces, Bambara believes that the Black community can really connect to achieve full equality and peace. She calls for a reshaping and renegotiation about western notions of self, which could provide new ideologies and understandings so that the Black

community will not succumb to the negative effects that western thought has placed upon them, which has been internalized by not only the oppressed, but the oppressor. Thus, Bambara's depiction of Campbell provides more commentary upon what it means to work together in order to create new ideologies concerning gender politics.

Campbell is a rather well-informed waiter in the Claybourne community. He is also a writer who, through his studies and his interactions with many people, has come into awareness about the happenings of the Black community. On his pad, after a hug rain pounded the town, Campbell wrote, "Damballah is the first law of thermodynamics and is the Biblical wisdom and is the law of time and is everything that is now has been before and will be again in a new way, in a changed form, in a timeless time" (249). This sentence is loaded with meaning as it points to rebirth, renewal, and the time and work that goes into achieving both. First, one must understand what thermodynamics does. According to "Thermodynamics 'beyond' local Equilibrium," thermodynamics is something that "provides us with the basis for understanding how heat and work are related with the rules that the macroscopic properties of equilibrium follow" (Vilar and Rubi 11081). If one were to substitute "heat" for Black men and "work" for Black women, Campbell's argument would be calling for a time when both men and women could work together, to gain "equilibrium" in order to understand and participate in changing the Black community for the better. Gloria Hull notes that, "Campbell is a projection of the authors' own incredibly associative mind, making connections between knowledge systems, political causes, and energy sources" (qtd. in Janelle Collins, 44). Here, readers are able to gather that Campbell is representative of a larger view of the world in which he lives. He is in tune with how everything works together in order to create harmony, and, unlike Obie and Roland, stands as a male voice in the novel that successfully comments about the need for both Black men and

Black women to work together to achieve wholeness. Having him convey this ideology is important because it shows a man's awareness about the need for coalitions, specifically as it relates to gender. Bambara uses Campbell to relay the fact that both men and women are needed in order to make effective wholeness come into fruition.

The Salt Eaters is a successful piece of literature that breaks away from an "imposed identity" (Brock 11), and creates its own categories; ones made to confront the issues that gender politics brings about. Through the many characters in the novel, Bambara humanizes the Black community and Black women in particular, by allowing them to speak out about women's involvement in the civil rights era. Bambara notes that "when sisters get passionate about themselves and their direction, it does not mean they're readying up to kick men's ass. They're readying up for honesty" ("On the Issue of Roles" 134). Through *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara carefully shows how the Black women in Claybourne were being very straightforward and sincere about the happenings of the community and how the past influenced their current situations. She negotiates gender tensions by welcoming the entire spirit of Black life; the negotiation fosters truth and transparency about reality, no lies. Thus, what *The Salt Eaters* vies for are possibilities; the work calls for coalition politics that help to bind the tear that gender tensions have created.

Chapter 3 Environmental Justice

Having highlighted how Bambara portrays activism and gender politics to reveal post-Civil Rights Era dynamics, I wish to focus this chapter on several characters, in particular Velma, Jan, Obie, Minnie, the Seven Sisters, and Fred, as they embody various facets of the struggle for communal and environmental justice. Writing before the formal environmental justice movement emerged, Bambara's novel exposes environmental racism in the fictional community of Claybourne. Instead of separating issues of place, culture, and justice, Bambara's novel consistently constructs environmental justice as emerging from individual responsibility to community, and community responsibility for individuals. Environmental racism surfaces in *The Salt Eaters* when readers become aware of the function of the Transchemical Company as an environmental hazard that makes people sick. "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" (3) asks Minnie Ransom, a healer in the community, asks the protagonist Velma Henry. This question, which opens *The Salt Eaters*, is strategically placed as readers become aware of individual responsibility for a different kind of social and political wholeness of a community. Social and political wholeness, however, are hard to come by because of external forces that have invaded the community. Robert R.M. Verchick, in "Feminist Theory and Environmental Justice" notes:

A common environmental justice motto is "we speak for ourselves" ... the words suggest unity, autonomy, and, of course, communication. The sharing of ideas --- among activists and with outside groups of institutions --- is essential to the movement's ambitious goal of mobilizing neglected communities and transforming meaning of environmental protection. By speaking for themselves, grassroots environmental groups

promote consciousness raising both in the ways in which they organize and in the procedural solutions they seek in environmental law. (68)

Verchick's sentiments echo Bambara as she creates a grassroots effort with her writings to speak about the negative effects of capitalism on the Claybourne community in *The Salt Eaters* and the ways in which understanding the self are pivotal to wholeness. The rhetoric in Bambara's work tells truths about waste dumping and chemicals that invade the atmosphere in order to make citizens aware of conditions so that members may act to make the community a healthier place. By acting, the community members participate in protecting themselves and the environment against the environmental hazards caused by an invasion of both privacy and environment. Among the first writers to make readers aware of the causes and effects of environmental racism, Bambara carves a space that organizes a consciousness about the plight of disenfranchised communities and demands that understanding come about in a time when it was unconventional to do so. Her "fiction" engages very real issues of environmental racism as a part of something that negatively impacts community members in a variety of direct and indirect ways.

Bambara comments about the strategic placement of harmful chemicals and places that produce those chemicals and the horrid conditions that they create. Bambara's novel looks beyond simple truths and situates this idea of environmental racism in the Claybourne community through her characters and how they are able (or not) to negotiate the negative effects of environmental racism within their community. In *The Salt Eaters*, the nuclear power industry, in the form of the Transchemical Corporation, functions as both an income source for Claybourne residents as well as a health hazard for the community. Because it works to fulfill both duties, the people in the community must make conscious, difficult decisions in an attempt at social and political health. One of the central activist characters in the novel, Jan, asks "whose

community do you think they ship radioactive waste through, or dig up waste burial grounds near? Who do you think they hire for the dangerous dirty work at those plants?” (242). The character Jan seeks to raise the consciousness of the inhabitants of Claybourne to the fact that radioactive materials and plants are most often found in communities where marginalized people reside. Energy, then, becomes a huge part of Bambara’s novel as it is literally and figuratively predicated on the work of community members. Energy becomes a metaphor for connectedness and can connect people to the Earth. Like wholeness, energy can be good or bad and the person who is in charge must figure out a way to use their energy or wholeness to the best of their ability. In this context, one is granted the democratic choice to be able to choose their cure and so one is able to choose good energy and good wholeness, or energy and wholeness that will not lead to progression. Minnie Ransom gives Velma a choice as the novel opens by saying, “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?” (3), making clear that the power to achieve good wholeness and energy ultimately lies on the individual.

Janelle Collins, in the essay “Generating Power: Fission, Fusion, and Postmodern Politics in Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*,” says that “energy appears not only as a metaphor for activism necessary to secure social change, but also as the energy that illuminates and enables our increasingly technologically advanced world” (40). Collins’ point highlights Clayborne as a place designed to produce new possibilities as people are literally able to be energized to work toward a common goal. It also suggests that the technological component of energy could help to make positive strides for improvement of the community in helping to promote new ideas. These two points elucidate the theme of energy as it provides a context in which to understand the function the power plant that is depicted in *The Salt Eaters*. One must note, however, that as an energy source, the community becomes susceptible to more problems. Collins notes that “the

specter of nuclear energy and its radioactive by-products haunt *The Salt Eaters*,” (40) and Collins emphasizes the interconnectedness of energy in the novel, which translates to how all people in the community are connected. This point also warns about the illusion of progress, and points to the education that community members need to make sound decisions about how energy will be used, in all facets of their lives. With the earth, with health, with thinking critically, and working, energy works in many portions of the character’s lives.

In that same vein, Velma Henry serves as a character that represents energy; she binds the novel and represents all facets of community. She is connected spiritually, physically, mentally, and socially, and finally feels the weight of such a large load when readers meet her in the opening of the novel as she contemplates suicide. Through flashbacks and lapses in time, readers see Velma as an activist in the Modern Civil Rights Movement, a wife, a mother, and a worker at the Academy for the Seven Arts, among other things. But her involvement with the Transchemical Company speaks about Bambara’s notion of oppression in disenfranchised communities as it describes the plight of poor people as being forced to work in dangerous conditions for survival. The text notes that the chemical plant “is not a healthy place to work, even in the office wing ... all workers have to report for a medical once a month to the company infirmary, plus they can’t see they can’t see their own records” (201). The plant’s refusal to show patients their medical records violates ethics and employee-employer confidentiality. The relative powerlessness of the Black community in which the Transchemical plant is embedded is apparent in this scene. Race and class are clearly factors in how the outside manufacturers of the power plant and the Transchemical company deal with hometown people.

As a computer operator for the Transchemical Company, Velma learns of the Transchemical Corporation polluting ways. She discovers that the plant had been “shipping

flatcars of slag, they call it, some kind of contaminated sludge, right through town to some burial grounds for radioactive waste that a plant in Alabama uses” (207). In her interactions with the chemical plant and her other work places, Velma is the character that was once “centered,” but when she becomes aware of what is happening at the chemical plant, on top of all of the other work that she participates in, she physically and mentally becomes fragmented (which is why readers meet her in a state of disarray at the opening of the novel). As Velma thinks about her situation while sitting on the stool at the Infirmary, she imagines suicide, which would take her to a place that is free from the oppression that she encounters, specifically with her new work as a computer operator in the power plant. As she sits on the stool in the Infirmary, Velma thinks of herself as grains of salt in an hourglass:

To be that sealed --- sound, taste, air, nothing seeping in. To be that unavailable at last, sealed in the noise of the world, the garbage, locked out. To pour herself grain by grain into the top globe and sift silently down to a heap in the bottom one. That was the sight she'd been on the hunt for. To lie coiled on the floor of the thing and then bunch up with all her strength and push from the bottom and squeeze through the waistline of the thing ... and she'd still be in the globes, in the glass jars, sealed from time and life. All that was so indelible on her retina that the treatment room and all its clutter and mutterings were canceled out. (19-20)

Through Velma's fragmented self, which is represented by the grains of salt, readers see that she places herself in a position to be whole; a position to gain the social and political astuteness that she needs in order to be able to safely flow throughout the hourglass and to ultimately confront the patriarchy that plagues her community via the chemical plant. This idea of fragmentation can also be related to Velma's life as being representative of the salt of the Earth. Because she is

important to so many people and works in many capacities, the spreading of the salt in the hour glass can be read as an environmental comment about the need to take care of the health of the individual, as well as the foods and nourishment that the earth needs in order to keep the individual healthy. Because many people are forced to work at the plant for survival and other community people are effected by association, Velma's fragmented self is useful to understand how torn the community can become because of environmental racism and how it effects the minds of those community people. They become torn by the lesser of two evils: 1.)go to work and die from cancer or 2.) stay home and allow their family to starve because the Earth has not received the proper nutrients (salt).

Bambara uses Velma to convey ideas of collective unity, of possibilities that lie in trying to be whole as well as the desolation that comes with trying to fight for justice (suicide or death due to environmental factors). But the metaphor of the hourglass makes clear that wholeness disconnected from others, wholeness based in isolation, is not real and cannot sustain life. In light of this dual meaning, it is important to note that Bambara's commentary about the extreme options for people affected by racism, sexism, and environmental pollution, as represented through fragmented Velma, is pivotal in understanding the real harm that social and political wrong doing creates. My analysis of Bambara's depiction represents a more nuanced view of Velma, commenting about environmental racism and how it has the ability to damage the minds of community people. Velma's struggle to get well, then, becomes even more important as it is representative of how disenfranchised communities, with community help, will be able to challenge and eventually surpass the awful treatment posited by environmental racism. Bambara suggests in *The Black Woman* that "we are involved in a struggle for liberation: liberation from the exploitive and dehumanizing system of racism, from manipulative control of a corporate

society; liberation from the constrictive norms of ‘mainstream’ culture, from the synthetic myths that encouraged us to fashion ourselves rashly without (reaction) rather than from within (creation)” (Preface 1). Through *Velma*, Bambara calls for a renegotiation of self, for people to understand how they are being affected by racism, sexism, classism, and the like.

Most critics read Bambara’s novel as depicting the Black community and the Earth as objects controlled by outside influences rather than subjects of their own destiny. Susan Willis, in *Specifying*, says that “the infirmary, the bus, and the café --- each includes a representative of institutionalized authority, white supremacy, or corporate economics. The penetration of these forces produces a complex set of social relationships and makes it impossible to wage the simple, straightforward tactics of oppositional politics” (133). Willis implies that the Claybourne community lacks the tools with which to control their own destiny. In an “advanced stage of capitalism” (134), Willis suggests that the novel speaks to the great complexity that comes when community members seek to understand the weight that wholeness requires. However, Minnie Ransom, who is a spiritual healer in the Claybourne community, tells Velma to “choose your cure, sweetheart. Decide what you want to do with wholeness” (*The Salt Eaters* 220). Instead of leaving characters to be read as both hopeless and helpless as Willis suggests, my thoughts are that Bambara creates a space that allows individuals to choose whether they will confront issues to make a conscious decision about making progressive change that could rid disenfranchised people of exploitation and misuse. Through *Velma* and *Minnie*, Bambara challenges readers to democratically choose to gain an understanding of how change and tradition must work together for disenfranchised communities and to come to terms with the fact that “wholeness is not trifling matter” (10), that strength and fortitude are needed in order to make a difference in a capitalist society. With help from her community members, Velma chooses to be well; she

chooses to confront issues of racism, classism, and gender, which requires taking action against injustices. As she negotiates her situation, Velma remarks “something crucial had been missing from the political/ economic/ social/ cultural/ aesthetic/ military/ psychosocial/ psychosexual mix ... maybe the thing to do was to invite the self by for coffee and a chat. Share with her how she herself had learned in ordinary folks’ capacity to change the self and transform society” (259). Velma, through her struggle and with help of the community, understands the need for a strong self and a form of connection to be able to combat the interrelated problems that people in oppressed communities face. The idea that something was “missing” from the mix speaks to the need for wholeness and critical engagement. Through her characters, Bambara also brings up ideas of how energy and commitment stand as elements needed in order to reach justice.

Minnie Ransom, who works to help Velma reach a point of wholeness, represents the need for a coalition politics, knowledge of tradition and a solid spiritual connection in order to make sense of how the negative effects of how environmental racism, in particular, can be combated. In the novel, Minnie Ransom speaks to a muse, Old Wife, who helps her to make sense of the world. She also consults several different community members at the Infirmary that houses Velma during her illness as well as the mud mothers, who are presumed to be spiritual ancestors. By soliciting help from multiple people, Minnie is representative of the effectiveness of coalitions and connections that must be made between all types of people in order for progressive wholeness to come about. Minnie says to Velma, “I can feel, sweetheart, that you are not quite ready to dump the shit ... got to give it all up, the pain, the hurt, the anger and make room for lovely things to rush in and fill you full. Nature abhors a so-called vacuum, don’t you know?” (16). Here, Minnie admonishes Velma to work to let all of the bad things go so that she can work to get to a place of solace; a place that will allow her to think critically and intensively

about what she can do to fight problems that are caused by her work load. Minnie also speaks about nature and the idea of it as a place of renewal that detests any notion of misuse. Minnie becomes a spokeswoman for the preservation of nature because of its healing properties and its ability, with strategic use, to be of great help to the community. As she speaks with her muse, Old Wife, Minnie says that:

They don't know we on the rise? That our time is now? Here we are in the last quarter and how we gonna pull it all together and claim the new age in our name? How we gonna rescue this planet from them radioactive mutants? ... we gonna have to get a mighty large group trained to pull through the times ahead. [They come to me] after abusing themselves and want to be well and don't even know what they want to be healthy for.

In this passage, Minnie laments about the stresses that the Transchemical Company has caused, suggesting that the community people have become “radioactive mutants” because of their proximity to its harmful chemicals. The analysis of environmental racism inherent in Minnie's expressions is clear as she tells of how fumes from the chemical plant have changed community inhabitants into unrecognizable people who cannot think, or act, particularly about health. Minnie speaks about how she will have to mobilize a group of people to restore wholeness to the community. Minnie makes known that there is a possibility for community members to get through the negative effects of environmental racism, if they only advocate for action, community connections, and seeing nature as an active part of the community before they get in a situation similar to Velma's. Minnie presses the need for education for the community so that they may get through the tough times; thus, she too becomes an advocate for progressive spiritual, social and political change in the novel.

Bambara's character Fred Holt, a bus driver in the novel, also presents compelling flashbacks about his subconscious interpretation of the environment and capitalism. When he is introduced in the novel, Fred is depicted as a normal community member who worked hard to get his job as a driver. The text notes that his office "for years ... hadn't hired colored guys. Now, just when he was getting some seniority, they were talking about early retirement" (66). Fred, then, represents the hard worker who was continually suppressed by his condition as a Black man in a capitalist society. He is also representative of the everyday connections that are made between strangers as Fred's bussing job exposes him to a myriad of different people. He shows the interconnectedness of a community worker.

As he waited for a train to pass, Fred thought "wood, coal, racks of jeeps, sealed cars with stenciled lettering revealing nothing at all about its contents. He'd heard they shipped trash from nuclear plants in cars like that" (69). Fred, too, was mindful of the fact that foul business was taking place using the train system, and that those who were around it could be exposed to a deadly substance. This flashback reminded Fred of his friend, Porter:

And Fred had to dampen his fingers to spread the newsprint flat and to read it quickly about the plants constructed right after the War, their War; how they were rapidly coming apart now. 'That way,' Porter said, putting another clipping down to read, smoothing out the crease and tearing it some, 'we old workers are dead before anybody can do a study about the effects of radiation on workers.' And Fred had nodded, then muttered 'cold-blooded,' quickly reading over the second item about a suit against a chemical plant by workers who'd left years ago and were dying of cancer. (70-71)

Fred, contemplating whether he should be checked for cancer at the Infirmary, thinks about his situation and how the chemical plant's workers risk their lives to simply live in the world. Fred

is a character whose memory provides a clear portrait of community conditions and how they influence regular people. Fred, too, speaks about how the chemical plant affects the community, highlighting environmental racism:

You're minding your business, staying off the streets, paying your bills and trying to make a go of your marriage. And some asshole expert releases radioactive fumes in the air and wipes you out in your chair reading the funnies. 'As we sit here,' Porter used to say, grabbing the edge of the counter, 'we are dying from overexposure to some kind of wasting shit --- the radioactive crap asbestos particles, noise, smog, lies.' And Fred would nod and push his plate away. (79)

By including Fred in the novel as an innocent bystander, Bambara comments on the connections that are made between all people in the community, no matter the occupation. The passage speaks to how the environment has been affected by the plant, and how the community is impacted by human destruction masquerading as economic opportunity. A few pages later, it is revealed that Porter, Fred's friend, indeed did die because "some type of wasting disease was eating him away" (80) which speaks to the pervasiveness of radioactive fumes and how they work to dismantle an entire community and, in the bigger picture, race of people. Bambara brings to light this critique of racism in disenfranchised communities and how innocent workers pay the ultimate price for simply living. The possibility of wholeness could come into fruition only when the community is able to recognize the connections and to work together to gain social and political coalition.

James "Obie" Henry also comments on environmental racism and how it influences his life and that of the Academy of the Seven Arts that he facilitates. Obie is a complacent character in the novel as he is Velma's husband and his portrait speaks about the commodification of

community and how capitalism can overtake organizations. Obie's Academy is broadly concerned with the arts. Before it was called the Academy, the space, which is located across from the Southwest Community Infirmary (established in 1871 by The Free Coloreds of Claybourne) was once the Mason's Hall and then the Fellowship Hall (120). The former names of the Academy are interesting to note as they allude to places where Black men would gather to discuss community matters at times when they were not considered citizens in the United States; this speaks to the history black male leadership. It is fitting that this same building is now dedicated to education for a myriad of people including "workers, dropouts, students, housewives, ex-cons, vets, church folk, [and] professionals" (120), because these are all occupations, whether good or bad, that Black people were not allowed to take part in as a whole. Thus, Obie is a character that is connected to the community because he has access to all types of people, even ones that worked at the Transchemical Company. The people who inhabit the Academy all connect in order to help keep the community structure in existence. Without the complexity of people, the Academy would not be able to perform its duties. Bambara, moreover, comments on the cognizance of the community as they speak to Obie about the commodification of the building:

There was the group who came by the house late at night to argue that the Academy, too visible and above ground, had performed its function, pulling folks together for a moment. And now that key people had been identified, it should be abandoned and a select group move off to the back district to organize a self-sufficient community ... After several tries, they modified the plan: a select few should nab some devalued real estate near the woods and move off for a year and start a brain trust farm. And finally do what the folks in the nineteenth century had talked about at the Colored People's

conventions ... finally do what had been a priority item in the early sixties, then got pushed aside when the movement was redefined from the outside. (91)

This passage speaks about the ways in which capitalist patriarchy has worked to hinder the advancement of the Claybourne community, and to the seductions of separatism. Because of outside forces that worked to obstruct privacy, the passage suggests that the community members had the wherewithal to move their meeting place altogether to gain privacy from people who could keep them from achieving, or even developing goals that could help make the community a better place. Thus, Obie was confronted with community members who wanted him to give up his job at the Academy to establish another place that was more secluded; a private place that would seem to be a step toward the change that the people wanted to see. If they moved, Academy would not be subjected to the fumes that the Transchemical Company was emitting, making the move one that would enable solitude and secure health. However, they would be running away from a problem that would continue to haunt their home lives.

Environmental concerns come in to play with Obie's portrait again when the community decides to protest the outside regulation of the Transchemical facility. The text notes, "The National Guard had been put on alert because of the labor-management crisis at Transchemical. And a vigilante group was rumored to be ready for the march, should it turn to some type of action" (211). If citizens are protesting and breathing in the fumes from Transchemical for a prolonged amount of time, they too become susceptible to the harmful effects that the plant produces. The fact that they would call the National Guard also mimics what the white leaders in the early to mid-twentieth century viewed as a threat to social order. Thus, the Guard, much like Selma Alabama's Bloody Sunday in the 1960s, would attempt to make "peace" by interrupting the protest. The community members who wanted Obie to move the Academy of

the Seven Arts demanded such for their own safety. The people were concerned with alleviating the pain and problems that came with the company. As a person of influence, one who could make decisions in such a situation, Obie serves as a character that has power, but is afraid to take the large steps needed in order to make a big difference. Bambara shows readers what happens when separatist politics are embraced and when people do not see connections between health, earth, and life.

Jan and Ruby, Velma's friends, are two women who also play a large part in conveying concerns about capitalism as it relates to the Transchemical Company in the Claybourne community. The two characters continually make lucid connections in the novel that add to their relevance as believable people who are committed to understanding and relaying the effects of Transchemical. As they wait for Velma in the town café for a meeting, Jan laments to Ruby:

What parts of the world do they test blasts in? And all them illegal uranium mines dug up ... the crops dying, the sheep dying, the horses. Water, cancer, Ruby, cancer ... it's an emergency situation, has been for years. All those thrown together plants they built in the forties and fifties are falling apart now. War is not the treat. It's all the 'peacetime' construction that's wiping us out" (242).

Jan blatantly tells readers of the sickness caused to community members as a direct result of the Transchemical Company. She makes known that the buildings that were supposed to bring about peace were creating more problems that resulted in the mass killing of people in the Black community. As a politically conscious Womanist, Jan goes on to suggest to Ruby the connections between the power industries and life in general. She questions, "You don't think there's no connection between the power plant and Transchemical and the power configurations in this city and the quality of life in this city, region, country, world?" (243). Jan boldly conveys

the point about how the power plant and Transchemical translate to the truncated life that community members are able to have. Ruby admits that she understands that there is a connection and that Jan “[sounds] like Velma” (242) which speaks to how she understands Jan’s sentiments about the connections made. The two women point to how hegemonic forces perpetuate capitalism that, in turn, negatively affects the livelihood of community members, which requires a type of resistance so that members can remain alive.

Bambara expresses what some critics call Black Feminist/Womanist vision. As bell hooks proclaims in her piece “Postmodern Blackness,”

The overall impact of postmodernism is that many other groups share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of a sense of grounding ... Radical postmodernism calls attention to those shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries... that could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy--ties that would promote recognition of common commitments, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition. (627-8)

Black feminism serves as a discipline that provides the space for those who have been and continue to be marginalized and disenfranchised in America and abroad to tell their stories. *The Salt Eaters*, then, grapples with how stories function to connect people and place, and how commitment to place necessitates social and environmental justice.

The Seven Sisters are a group comprised of women from different cultural groups and they are first introduced in the novel as passengers on Fred Holt’s bus. They are representative of Bambara’s notion of coalition politics; their unity-in-difference reflects how particular cultural strands can at once mesh and maintain their individual color and texture. Janelle Collins in her work “Generating Power: Fission, Fusion, and Postmodern Politics in Bambara’s *The Salt*

Eaters” looks to the women as a group from different backgrounds that serve as a unifying force, able to function within fragmentation and chaos. Bernice Johnson Reagan, in *Coalition Politics*, notes that “coalition work is not work done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets ... today, wherever women gather together it is not necessarily nurturing. It is coalition building” (359). Reagan’s sentiments echo Bambara’s idea about the uncomfortable, yet necessary nature of coalitions and further represents the notion through the Seven Sisters. Collins notes that “Bambara represents the Seven Sisters as one possible approach to coalition politics, without foreclosing other possibilities” (39). This notion of coalition politics is one that pervades *The Salt Eaters* because it stands as what Bambara believes will ultimately help to make the community better as The Seven Sisters are all women of color. When it began to thunder and rain in the novel while the Seven Sisters were in the café, Collins alludes to how one of the sisters, Iris of the Plantain, was treated while handing out pamphlets in the city of Barnwell. Collins references the ways in which Iris’ thoughts mesh with the other sisters. She notes, “That contaminated soil that had provoked the local folk of Barnwell to join with hundreds of safe-earth activists was uppermost in their minds, each run meant contamination leaching inches ever closer to the water table, spelling the ruin of the Savannah River and all who lived in it, on it, from it” (225). This passage speaks to how the chemical plant affects the water that people in the community need to drink and complete everyday tasks. In this light, it is clear that the chemical plant works as a negative entity that connects the community in damaging ways. The sisters bring this point to light as they comment on silent impact of capitalism, placed in the town by hegemonic forces. But, embedded within this is a call for unity, a call for people within the community to stand up and fight for what is needed in order to protect the community from outside forces that could prove to be hazardous. Collins also alludes to Donna Haraway in her

analysis of the Seven Sisters, “In a note on her ‘Cyborg Manifesto,’ Donna Haraway locates *The Salt Eaters* in the context of postmodern politics, suggesting that ‘the women of color theater group, the Seven Sisters, explores [an alternative] form of unity’” (39). Here, readers are able to see ways in which the novel participates in a postmodern conversation, but over and above that, a conversation that is embraced by women of color feminists, using the Seven Sisters as a way to view unity as maintaining multiplicity in difference. Thus, the Seven Sisters connect multiple cultures in order to show the need for coalition building, which could potentially help to make the community a better place.

In the preface to her anthology, *The Black Woman*, Bambara notes that one of her goals is to “chart the steps necessary for forming a working alliance with all non-white women of the world for the formation of, among other things, a clearing house for the exchange of information” (6). The Seven Sisters in *The Salt Eaters*, then, represent the possibilities of this information exchange that Bambara speaks of in her nonfiction work. The sisters are from different cultures and provide each other with key information about problems that influence their communities. In a broader sense, Seven Sisters are advocates of progressive social, political, and healthy ideas that promote wholeness and coalitions.

Bambara writes about things that are hard for people to hear; she writes about the truths about how chemicals invade the earth and harm people in disenfranchised communities through their work spaces and personal spaces. Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*, as theorist Ihab Hassan wrote, “evokes what [one tries] to suppress” (588), meaning that she does not hold back as she conveys what happens in Black and disenfranchised communities at the hand of environmental racism. Bambara’s overall commentary about environmental justice is highlighted, and the

ambiguous ending to *The Salt Eaters* shows the need for understanding the myriad of possibilities and dangers that exist with energy and wholeness.

Conclusion

Toni Cade Bambara speaking embodied truth to the powerful and the less powerful makes her work a grounded force that never deviates from real instances that affect real people. As she works to show the interconnectedness of all components of life, Bambara's notion of what it means to be whole is illuminated. Through my discussions of Bambara's stance regarding coalition politics, how she depicts gender politics, and environmentalism, it is my hope that readers are able to conceptualize the relevance and the urgency of Bambara's important work as elements that must be added to critical discourse about life, people, and the importance of understanding and being strategic about changing the trajectory of old pathologies for learning, living, and thinking about life.

Bambara's resistant texts prove that there is much more that needs to be done in order to tackle interlocking systems of oppression that are racism, classism, and sexism, among others. In an interview with Kalumu ya Salaam, Bambara said "I'm trying to break words open to get at the bones, deal with symbols as if they were atoms. I'm trying to find out not only how a word gains its meaning, but how a word gains its power" (qtd. in *Savoring the Salt* 71). The interview encapsulates the thoughts of a rhetorician whose interests deal with looking to the root of a problem to find the best solution --- and in doing so, the rhetorician posits a new way to understand language and authority. It is a known fact that many atoms work together in order to make the body function properly, to make it act as a whole. In that same vein, the desire to learn about how power is possessed by a word not only shows Bambara's interests in language, it also shows her commitment to life and the pursuit of wholeness for communities. Thus, what can be noted here is that the work of a mastermind, Toni Cade Bambara, continues to challenge all people to take a good look at themselves to be able to embrace coalition politics that will aid in

reaching social, political, and spiritual wholeness, and my goal is to make sure that her work continues to be a serious contender in critical discourse.

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