O’NEIL, JUSTINE EILEEN. “Reciprocity is everything”: The Female Journey to Elective Bonding in African-American Literature. (Under the direction of Dr. Sheila Smith-McKoy.)

This thesis identifies the severe impact of compulsory heterosexuality in the African-American community. In particular, I explore the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality is tied to the legacy of slavery and how it damages Black female subjectivity as well as Black love relationships. I focus on three novels by African-American women – Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975), Opal Palmer Adisa’s *It Begins with Tears* (1997) and Pearl Cleage’s *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* (1997) – to illustrate the struggle that Black women face when subjected to sexual and emotional restrictions. I submit that the opposition to compulsory heterosexuality is elective bonding, in which women demand agency in all relationships. Chapter one discusses the authors’ portrayals of how compulsory heterosexuality causes a repression of female desire, particularly when women structure their sexual lives around male satisfaction and reproduction. Chapter two focuses on the power of compulsory heterosexuality to obstruct female bonding from women’s lives, mainly by promoting female competition for the male gaze. Finally, chapter three outlines the steps necessary to escape the limitations of compulsory heterosexuality and to enter into elective bonding. My research suggests that effective elective bonding depends largely on building female community. Elective bonding ultimately prepares women to be active agents in all relationships, particularly those with men, in which they denounce compulsory heterosexuality and demand reciprocity. In this project, I posit that female bonding is the medium through which women can escape the sexual and emotional limitations of compulsory heterosexuality.
“RECIPROCITY IS EVERYTHING”: THE FEMALE JOURNEY TO ELECTIVE BONDING IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

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BIOGRAPHY

Justine O’Neil is originally from Fraser, Michigan. In 2003, she graduated from Adrian College with a B.A. in English Literature. Upon completion of this degree, she developed an interest in critical theories of difference (gender, sexual and racial), which culminated in this project. She is currently employed as a Cognitive Skills Trainer at LearningRx, in Raleigh.
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    My father, for promoting a love of learning.

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My mother, for her unwavering support and confidence in me.

    T.J., for being an essential part of my own journey . . .
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INTRODUCTION

Adrienne Rich’s theory of compulsory heterosexuality references the presumption that female sexuality is inherently predisposed to desire men; this limits women, not only sexually, but in regard to emotional bonding with other women as well. This thesis expands on Rich’s work to show the extreme impact of compulsory heterosexuality in African-American culture, particularly the ways in which it is tied to the legacy of slavery and how it damages Black female subjectivity as well as Black love relationships. I focus on three novels by African-American women1 – Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975), Opal Palmer Adisa’s *It Begins with Tears* (1997) and Pearl Cleage’s *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* (1997) – to illustrate the struggle that Black women face when subjected to sexual and emotional restrictions. I submit that the opposition to compulsory heterosexuality is elective bonding, in which women are active agents in all relationships, and the journey to elective bonding is facilitated by building a sense of female community.

The ideas posited in this thesis are informed by those of bell hooks, Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich. In a 2003 Foreword to a re-print of her 1980 article, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Rich says that the article was originally meant “to encourage heterosexual feminists to examine heterosexuality as a political institution which disempowers women – and to change it” (11). Rich comments on the sexual and emotional limitations that compulsory heterosexuality imposes upon women, as well as women’s silent acceptance of these restrictions. In particular, she claims: “women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable – even if

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1 Opal Palmer Adisa is of Jamaican descent, but she has resided in the United States since the age of 16.
unsatisfying or oppressive – components of their lives” (20). This thesis adds to the conversation of compulsory heterosexuality by showing the way it harms the Black community, and particularly Black female subjectivity.

In addition to Rich, hooks attends to the causes of female subordination in *Communion: The Female Search for Love*. She claims that women are doomed to feel unlovable because society deems their femaleness as unimportant. As a result, they strive endlessly to be worthy of love from others (xv). Furthermore, hooks argues that racist and sexist stereotypes, originating in times of slavery, intensify this attitude of female worthlessness for Black women. These stereotypes still exist today and are perpetuated by white patriarchy. Therefore, hooks rightly asserts that, “Promoting devaluation and hatred of black females has been absolutely politically strategic within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (*Salvation* 102-03). Through her work on the oppression of Black women and its connection to their feelings of worthlessness, hooks helps explain why compulsory heterosexuality affects Black women so severely.

Similarly, Lorde treats the complex issue of difference that Black women deal with, specifically from her perspective as a Black, lesbian feminist. However, Lorde also advocates for a banding together despite differences. In the Black community, specifically, Lorde comments on the tendency of Black women to be “vulnerable to the false accusation that anti-Sexist is anti-Black” (*Age* 120). In reality, Lorde points out that it is through an elimination of sexism that the Black community can be liberated. In order to achieve this liberation, however, Black women must find strength within themselves to overcome oppression. She notes that:
When Black women in this country come together to examine our sources of strength and support, and to recognize our common social, cultural, emotional, and political interests, it is a development which can only contribute to the power of the Black community as a whole. (*Scratching 46*)

Thus, Lorde notes the importance of female bonding in the fight against oppression and its connection to attaining power for the entire race.

While compulsory heterosexuality has a severe impact on the subjugation of women, particularly on Black women, it is not the only element that works to create power imbalance in Black love relationships. For instance, issues of racism and classism also work together as systems of oppression in the Black community. These social disparities are equally destructive to the relationships between men and women because, like compulsory heterosexuality, they promote paradigms of power struggles which culminate in male dominance over women. While these significant issues of racism and classism contribute to the female oppression discussed in this thesis, my focus is on the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality in particular works to structure relationships in which Black men are privileged, while Black women are subsequently devalued.

This project focuses specifically on the work of Black women writers who use literature to call attention to the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality not only devalues women, but also the ways in which it is particularly detrimental to Black female subjectivity and to Black communal resistance to white patriarchy and racism. These authors’ portrayals of the female effort for personal strength and freedom show that such efforts prepare women for healthy, heterosexual relationships. Therefore, I argue that
these relationships aid in uniting Black men and women while also eliminating roles of domination and submission, which helps to strengthen and develop the Black community.

These authors address the importance of female bonding by portraying the harm that results when it is ignored, as well as illustrating the way the shared female experience helps to heal a woman’s emotional wounds. However, while Rich tends to view lesbianism as the appropriate opposition to compulsory heterosexuality, I argue that these texts suggest that there is a possibility of a healthy, heterosexual woman who opposes compulsory heterosexuality. She is one who celebrates her femaleness while also preparing for and demanding sexual reciprocity.

Although compulsory heterosexuality is a universal concept, these three novels illustrate that it is a significantly complicated issue for Black women. Black women are subjugated for class and race in addition to sexuality. For instance, in Audre Lorde’s essay on differences within the Black community, “I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities,” she elaborates on the oppression of Black women by using herself as an example: “When I say I am a Black feminist, I mean I recognize that my power as well as my primary oppression come as a result of my Blackness as well as my womanness, and therefore my struggles on both these fronts are inseparable” (26). This multi-faceted oppression complicates relationships between Black men and women, since Black women must face the daunting task of resisting domination by men and bonding together as women, while also remaining united with those men for the sake of their race. Furthermore, bell hooks explains why Black women allow heterosexism, noting that:
Since black males were portrayed as victims, castrated and emasculated, white and black women alike were especially forgiving of black male sexism. When individual black women active in the feminist movement challenged black male misogyny, [these black women] were attacked as traitors to the race. *(Salvation* 136-7)

This rationalization appropriately describes the dynamic between Black men and women that exists in the three novels addressed in this thesis. The authors show that when Black women are guided by compulsory heterosexuality, and compelled to remain faithful to Black men, they end up silently enduring blatant sexism.

My research suggests that Black women are more susceptible to compulsory heterosexuality than white women since they are doubly bound to Black men: sexually and racially. Moreover, Black women have been bound to master/slave relationships, never having occupied the role of master in these situations. This is a problem that hooks addresses in her essay, “Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory.” She explains that white women and Black men, while oppressed, do have the ability to assume the role of the oppressor because: “Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of women. White women may be victimized by sexism, but racism enables them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black people” (15). Ultimately, compulsory heterosexuality is most severe for Black women and subsequently, the need for sexual reciprocity is most significant in relationships between a Black men and women.

Moreover, the oppression of Black women is an even larger problem in that it harms the race as a whole. Lorde speaks of a “dialogue between Black women and Black
men that is so essential to our survival as a people” (Interview Evans 78). Likewise, hooks asserts: “freedom … can only be a complete reality when our world is no longer racist or sexist” (Ain’t I a Woman 117). Ultimately, Lorde and hooks appropriate the strength of the Black race as reliant on the communion of Black men and women. The essential “dialogue” referenced by Lorde can be achieved in an elected, sexually reciprocal relationship. Thus, in addition to gaining sexual freedom and female power, I assert that elective bonding is necessary for Black empowerment, since it aids in uniting Black men and women.

In order to reach elective bonding, however, a woman must first become comfortable with her personal sexuality and desire, separate from men. This process requires a personal relationship and love for herself and her body, as well as openness with her female friends. Elective bonding is supplemented by self-love and sisterhood, which are also discussed by hooks. In Communion, hooks contends that a combination of love and acceptance of oneself, coupled with a sisterly bond with other women, allows a woman to be fully loved by another. I argue that this paradigm is also true in regard to female sexuality, in addition to female love. By attaining acceptance of herself and comfort with her body, along with female friendship, a woman becomes prepared to enter into elected relationships, in which she is free to express her desire. The sexually healthy women of the novels that comprise my study are unafraid of their bodies and their desire. Additionally, they acknowledge an appreciation of other women and engage in female friendships. Female bonding causes women to own a sense of pride for their femininity and to be undaunted by sexual and emotional desires. In this way, women appropriately prepare themselves for elective bonding, in which female desire is equally as important as
male desire. Ultimately, by loving themselves and their female friends, women demonstrate a wide sexuality that prepares them to define their individual desire. I submit that it is through these preparatory steps that a woman may enter into a healthy heterosexual relationship, one in which she demands respect and sexual reciprocity.

The following chapters examine the workings of compulsory heterosexuality in the novels by Jones, Adisa and Cleage, and then propose the ways in which elective bonding works to combat the restrictions that compulsory heterosexuality presents. Ultimately, I argue that the presumption that female sexuality is inherently directed toward men limits women both sexually and emotionally, as evidenced by the portraits of the female characters in these texts. Cleage’s list of “ten things every woman should know,” which includes routine responsibilities such as food preparation, first aid and financial management serves as a record of ideas to combat the limitations of compulsory heterosexuality (158). Furthermore, Cleage’s list suggests that a woman is free when she is responsible for herself, which ushers in the notion that women can resist the limitations of compulsory heterosexuality by owning a sense of sexual responsibility. This process leads to elective bonding, which constitutes the woman, like the man, as an active, desiring agent in a sexual relationship. In this way, she can powerfully embrace sexual and emotional freedom.

Chapter one discusses the ways in which the authors present the effects of compulsory heterosexuality on women’s lives. The women of these texts structure their sexual lives around male satisfaction and reproduction; women are not active participants in these sexual relationships, but are rather possessions of their male partners. In Corregidora, Ursa’s family history of rape and prostitution has taught her that the true
goal of sex is to “make generations” and that the man is the desiring subject, while the woman exists only as the desired object. Through her portrayal of Ursa’s infertility, Jones suggests that compulsory heterosexuality causes Ursa to repress all sexual desire. In *It Begins With Tears*, Adisa shows that Monica’s lifestyle as a prostitute emphasizes male desire and she is consequently led to structure her life in rural Jamaica around sexual relationships with both single and married men. Finally, in *What Looks Like Crazy*, Cleage presents the plight of Ava, an HIV-positive woman who tries to find her strength in her hometown of Idlewood, Michigan, which is consumed by drugs, sex and teen pregnancy. By having the most abusive male in the novel nickname Ava “death pussy” (111), Cleage shows that Ava’s HIV-positive status renders her worthless in a town that views women as sexual objects.

Chapter two focuses on the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality obstructs female bonding in Black women’s lives. In *Corregidora*, Jones explores this link between compulsory heterosexuality and a lack of female friendship mainly through Ursa’s relationship with her sole female friend, Cat. Ursa organizes her life around sexual relationships with men, and relationships with women are therefore viewed as a lesser concern. Additionally, once Ursa learns that Cat is a lesbian, she ends their relationship abruptly, again placing greater value on compulsory heterosexuality and choosing to not preserve the one female friendship she had. Likewise, in *It Begins With Tears*, Monica values her relationships with men more than those with women, which causes her to be desired by men but abhorred by women. Adisa’s example of Monica highlights the way a woman’s emphasis on heterosexuality and heterosexism can cause her to lose all potential female friendships. Alternatively, in *What Looks Like Crazy*....
an *Ordinary Day*, Cleage presents a situation in which women have begun to recognize that they have neglected the importance of female friendships in their lives. In an effort to rectify this void, Ava’s sister, Joyce, organizes a female support group that allows women to freely share their respective physical, emotional and sexual hardships, ultimately serving as an opposition to compulsory heterosexuality and aiding the female journey into elective bonding.

Cleage’s focus on women’s efforts to combat abuse and to embrace female bonding segues into chapter three of this thesis, which outlines the steps necessary to move away from compulsory heterosexuality and toward elective bonding. My research suggests that effective elective bonding depends largely on building female community. Further, the process most often is initiated by a traumatic event that propels a woman to surrender to the care of other women and to embrace self-love. Finally, this process gives the “free woman” the ability to care for other women, thereby building a community of women who are free from the confines of compulsory heterosexuality. These steps prepare women to be active agents in all relationships, particularly those with men, in which they denounce compulsory heterosexuality and demand reciprocity. In this project, I posit that this kind of female bonding is the medium through which women can escape the sexual and emotional limitations of compulsory heterosexuality.
CHAPTER ONE

“IT BOTHERS ME BECAUSE I CAN’T FEEL ANYTHING”: COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY AND REPRESSION OF FEMALE DESIRE

Although the novels of Jones, Adisa and Cleage are vastly different, they are alike in that they offer uncensored views of the problems that can arise in heterosexual relationships when men and society impose on a woman’s sexual freedom. Under the assumption that heterosexuality is instinctual, men are enabled to possess women as sexual property and to control female sexuality, identity and reproduction. This chapter examines the three authors’ examples of the effects that compulsory heterosexuality has on African-American female sexuality and desire when men are defined as desiring subjects while women merely exist as the desired objects. These authors show the ways in which women structure their sexual lives around male satisfaction and reproduction. Consequently, the lack of sexual reciprocity in these relationships portrays female desire as impossible, and women as possessions to their male partners.

Because these women exist as property and are not allowed agency, compulsory heterosexuality thrives on female silence. Adrienne Rich comprehensively discusses the sexual and emotional limitations that compulsory heterosexuality imposes upon women, as well as women’s silent acceptance of these restrictions. In particular, she claims: “women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable – even if unsatisfying or oppressive – components of their lives” (20). The authors of this study suggest, too, that a compulsory heterosexual lifestyle relies on a woman’s quiet obedience and each author offers examples of the female obligation to men. In addition, when heterosexual relationships are structured only around male
satisfaction, female desire is neglected and consequently repressed. This chapter presents
the authors’ portraits of compulsory heterosexuality in the Black community as they
collectively suggest that such a lifestyle distorts a woman’s views of relationships and
sex, ultimately rendering her incapable of any sexual desire.

In *Corregidora*, Gayl Jones focuses on the very personal battle that sexually
victimized women endure. Through the novel’s uncensored treatment of sexuality and
abuse and its first-person narrative, Jones suggests that a woman’s battle with these issues
ushers her into an obligatory heterosexual lifestyle. In the novel, the Portuguese
slaveholder, Corregidora, purchases the protagonist’s great-grandmother, Dorita, as a
slave. Corregidora derives his wealth from running a brothel rather than using slaves on
a plantation. Thus, he prostitutes Dorita’s enslaved body and uses her as his concubine.
Dorita is forced to sleep with Corregidora, his brothel customers and his wife.
Corregidora eventually impregnates Dorita, then rapes and impregnates their child,
ultimately fathering both Ursa’s grandmother and mother. It is appropriate for Jones to
construct her novel of female sexual dysfunction around the sexual abuses of slavery,
since bell hooks claims that, “the designation of all black women as sexually depraved,
immoral, and loose had its roots in the slave system” (*Ain’t I a Woman* 52). It is the
sexual slavery of Ursa’s maternal ancestors that begins the pattern of compulsory
heterosexuality in her life. Therefore, the most blatant example of the oppression of
women through sexual objectification occurs before Ursa’s birth. It shapes her views on
men and sex, ultimately propelling her into a compulsory heterosexual existence.

Jones’s depiction of Corregidora deriving profit from his abuse of Ursa’s
ancestors reinforces the concept of forced heterosexuality and suggests that it is
normative. The women are used to serve the needs of men and are taught that their worth is derived from their bodies and their sexuality. The female body is exploited for male benefit, and the entire process is constructed around both sex and economics. When buying his female slaves, for example, Corregidora closely examines their sexual potential: “They’d have to raise up their dresses so he could see what they had down there, and he feel all around down there, and then he feel their bellies to see if they had solid bellies. And they had to be pretty” (173). This process illustrates that, for Corregidora, a woman’s value is ultimately bound to her body. Jones shows that Dorita lacks sexual desire by portraying her detachment when Corregidora misuses her body. In one noteworthy scene, Jones describes how Dorita is punished for daring to speak with a Black man. Corregidora rapes Dorita while his men are hunting down this young Black man. Jones emphasizes Dorita’s detachment from both the rape and from the violence of the lynching ritual:

Yes, tha’s just how I was feeling, while he was up there jumping up and down between my legs they was out there with them hounds after that boy … And then somehow it got in my mind that each time he kept going down in me would be that boy’s feet running. And then when he come, it meant they caught him. (127-28)

It is impossible, then, for Dorita to find pleasure or to understand her own desire. Her sexual experience is devoid of intimacy; and, in it, she exists as object rather than as a desiring subject. Her body benefits the men who receive sexual pleasure from it, and Corregidora, who derives financial benefit from it. Dorita emphasizes the significance of the ways in which her body profits Corregidora noting that: “he didn’t send nothing but
the rich mens in there to me, cause he said I was his little gold pussy, his little gold piece” (124). Through Dorita’s language, Jones demonstrates the relationship of money and the female sexual body, and how that equation benefits men alone. In addition, Jones emphasizes the fact that Dorita is robbed of agency in these sexual relationships.

Corregidora profits from Dorita both financially and sexually. He uses her body for his own sexual benefit, and through this relationship, he impregnates her. He then exploits this child, Ursa’s grandmother, as he exploited Dorita. Both women are used to satisfy Corregidora’s sexual desires and those of his brothel customers, which brings Corregidora additional financial revenue. Following the impregnation of Ursa’s grandmother, Corregidora’s financial gain reaches its peak: after paying for just one slave, in the end, he owns three bodies that bring him money. Through this economic abuse of the Black female body, Jones comments on the way sexual relations are for the man’s benefit; the woman’s wants and desires are not of concern. Jones also presents Corregidora’s sexual claiming of his own progeny as an example of the way men enforce compulsory heterosexuality in the lives of women.

In *Corregidora*, Jones recognizes the lasting effects of sexual slavery on Black women, and emphasizes it by associating Ursa closely with women who were subjected to such abuse. In *Ain’t I a Woman*, bell hooks attends to the lasting effects of slavery on the Black female psyche. She appropriately argues that the sexual abuse of Black women during slavery impacts the status of Black women in contemporary society:

The significance of the rape of enslaved black women was not simply that it ‘deliberately crushed’ their sexual integrity for economic ends but that it led to a devaluation of black womanhood that permeated the psyches of all
Americans and shaped the social status of all black women once slavery ended. (*Ain’t I a Woman* 52)

By making Ursa aware of the sexual abuse endured by her maternal ancestors, and by showing the severe impact that this knowledge has upon Ursa, Jones illustrates the way the legacy of slavery intensifies Black women’s experience of compulsory heterosexuality.

The plight of the Corregidora women is one of explicit compulsory heterosexuality, as it promotes the interests of men and the patriarchy as a whole, while ignoring the needs and desires of women. There is absolutely no sense of sexual reciprocity in these relationships, which teaches the Corregidora women that the sexual manipulation of women’s bodies is for the benefit of men alone. At the same time, this pattern forbids the women from playing an active role in their sexual lives. In this way, Jones’s novel corroborates the notion that a culture based on inherent heterosexual desire not only dictates sexual orientation, but it also limits and controls all aspects of female desire and pleasure. As such, assumed and naturalized heterosexuality damages heterosexual women and lesbians alike. Yet, in *Crimes Against Women: Proceedings of the International Tribunal*, Diana E. H. Russell and Nicole Van de Ven argue that “few heterosexual women realize their lack of free choice about their sexuality, and few women realize how and why compulsory heterosexuality is also a crime against them” (40). In the case of the Corregidora women, it is irrelevant whether or not they would have chosen a heterosexual existence, if allowed free will on the matter. Instead, their trauma lies in the fact that their sexual orientation was assigned to them as desire was stripped from them. In particular, Dorita instructs both Ursa and her mother to engage in
heterosexual lifestyles in order to reproduce. Thus, Jones shows that Ursa and her mother are still victimized by compulsory heterosexuality even when Corregidora is no longer present in their lives.

Jones shows that the lessons of male superiority and naturalized heterosexuality that was thoroughly embedded in the minds of the Corregidora women serve as the basis of Ursa’s sexual education. After the Corregidora women were freed, all written documentation of their slavery was destroyed. As Ursa explains, “they burned all the slavery papers so it would be like they never had it” (9). However, the Corregidora women keep their history alive through oral story telling and convince Ursa that it is her responsibility to keep the tradition alive. Ursa learns of this duty early; Dorita explains to five-year old Ursa:

They didn’t want to leave no evidence of what they done – so it couldn’t be held against them. And I’m leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have the evidence to hold up. (14)

For the Corregidora women, physical evidence is temporary, but memory is permanent. Ursa is advised: “the important thing is making generations. They can burn papers, but they can’t burn conscious” (22). Through the absorption of her ancestor’s stories and through the understanding of her necessary procreation, Ursa is taught that the goals of sex include only male pleasure and reproduction. These lessons mold Ursa’s sexuality as an adult.

While Jones portrays somewhat of a sense of female community for the Corregidora women, she also suggests that women are capable of perpetuating the
compulsory heterosexual cycle. The impact of Ursa’s ancestors on her sexuality, for instance, is reinforced by hooks’s discussion of the tendency of female slaves to help maintain the wrongs of white patriarchy. She writes: “By completely accepting the female roles as defined by patriarchy, enslaved black women embraced and upheld an oppressive sexist social order and became (along with their white sisters) both accomplices in the crimes perpetrated against women and the victims of those crimes” (*Ain’t I a Woman* 49). Jones speaks to this role of female slaves as “accomplices” through the Corregidora women’s impact on Ursa’s life. Although Ursa’s ancestors attempt to combat Corregidora’s wrongs, they instead work to perpetuate the paradigm of compulsory heterosexuality by forcing Ursa to define her womanhood as a sexual machine, meant only to reproduce, and as a sexual object, meant to serve male desire.

Jones situates desire as devoid from Ursa’s sexual life, and emphasizes instead the link between sex and reproduction. Because of the way she had been brought up – listening to her maternal ancestors pass down the stories of Corregidora – Ursa connects sex directly with reproduction, and it is difficult for her to separate the two. As such, she is unable to associate female desire with her sexual life, because she does not see her own pleasure and/or desire as a goal. Ursa organizes her life around sex, but only because of her responsibility to reproduce, to “make generations.”

Jones illustrates the harm in focusing entirely on the reproductive purposes of sex and ignoring the possibility of female sexual desire by making it impossible for Ursa to “make generations.” In an argument between Ursa and Mutt, Mutt says, “I don’t like those mens messing with you.” When she replies, “Don’t nobody mess with me,” Mutt answers, “Mess with they eyes” (3). As a man, Mutt demonstrates his understanding of
the tendency of men to prey on women through the male gaze. Similar to Corregidora’s examining of the female body before purchasing his slaves, men objectify Ursa by inspecting her body when it is onstage before them. In a jealous rage, Mutt shoves Ursa down a flight of stairs, which causes her to become sterile. She is no longer able to fulfill her role of passing down the Corregidora story through generations. Ursa needs Mutt in order to “make generations,” but he is also the one who violently takes away her ability to reproduce. Jones ultimately shows the power that men have in Ursa’s compulsory heterosexual life.

Through Ursa’s digressions and flashbacks throughout the novel, Jones illustrates Ursa’s inability to feel desire and her obsession with reproduction. Once her ability to give birth is violently stolen from her, Ursa’s view of sex becomes even more jaded and confused. In one significant flashback, Jones shows the way Ursa represses sexual desire by focusing on her inability to reproduce:

When he got back from work he’d ask me to rub his thighs. Do you feel how tight the muscles are? Yes. My hand on his belly then. The mark of his birth. I’d tell him, I have a birthmark between my legs. That’s make him laugh. But it’s your fault all my seeds are ruined forever. No warm ones, only bruised ones, not even bruised ones. No seeds. (45)

Note that Ursa’s thought process transitions immediately from sex to birth. When feeling Mutt’s body and touching his abdomen, rather than feeling any sexual desire or even anticipating a sexual act, her thoughts turn directly to his birth. In addition, as she refers to the “birthmark between my legs,” she quickly associates her sexual organ with its inability to reproduce, and not with any sexual desire or sensation. In this way, Jones
shows that Ursa views the female body, and hers in particular, as only a reproductive machine; sexual desire is incompatible with it.

This link between sexual acts and Ursa’s reproductive inabilities is detrimental to her sexuality in that it reinforces a compulsory heterosexuality and likewise eliminates any possibility of sexual reciprocity. The sexual education that Ursa obtains from the Corregidora women limits her sexually because Ursa is not allowed free will in regard to her sexual orientation. Instead, it is predetermined for her, by her ancestors. Heterosexuality is essential for Ursa since she has been taught that the goal of sex is to produce offspring. Additionally, because Ursa cannot separate reproduction and sexual activity, once she becomes infertile, she is consequently unable to see any point to sex. This assertion is apparent in one of Ursa’s fantasized conversations with Mutt:

‘What bothers you?’

‘It bothers me because I can’t make generations.’

‘What bothers you?’

‘It bothers me because I can’t.’

‘What bothers you?’

‘It bothers me because I can’t fuck.’

‘What bother’s you, Ursa?’

‘It bothers me because I can’t feel anything.’ (90)

Again, Ursa relates reproduction to sexual activity, yet here she actually makes a more radical assertion: because she cannot reproduce, she subsequently cannot enjoy sex. Jones employs repetition in this imagined conversation to convey the severity and multiplicities of Ursa’s plight. Yet, the repetition here also serves to demonstrate Ursa’s
linking of these separate concepts – reproduction, sexual intercourse, and sexual desire. For Ursa, when reproduction is eliminated, the other options also become impossibilities. Jones suggests that exposure to a naturalized heterosexual existence and a sexuality that seeks only to please the man causes a perpetuation of compulsory heterosexuality that affects women before birth. Because of the experiences of the Corregidora women, Ursa has already learned to satisfy male desire and thereby neglect her own desire, even before her forced sterilization. Through Ursa’s recollection of a night with Mutt, Jones references the lack of sexual reciprocity in their relationship:

I was exhausted with wanting and I waited but he didn’t turn toward me and I kept waiting and wanting him and I got up close to him up against his back but he still wouldn’t turn to me and then I lay on my back and tried hard to sleep and I finally slept and I thought in the morning he would but he didn’t and I waited and the clock got him up and he went off to work and I lay there still waiting. (64)

In this scene, Ursa does acknowledge her desire, but she also abides by the notion that the man is meant to govern all sexual acts. As a woman, Ursa is not permitted to initiate sexual intimacy, regardless of her desire. Frustrated after Mutt leaves for work, Ursa thinks, “don’t make me use my fingers, and then I got up too” (65). Ursa views her own female body in the light of compulsory heterosexuality. It is an object for the pleasure of man, not a part of her individual sexuality or her personal desire. Although she is, at this point, able to acknowledge her desire, Ursa’s sexuality remains limited since she is incapable of bringing herself pleasure. Jones illustrates that because Ursa is governed by compulsory heterosexuality, she is unable to experience sexual pleasure.
Jones elaborates on the lack of sexual reciprocity between Ursa and Mutt by again emphasizing Ursa’s submission in regard to sex with Mutt. Although Ursa believes it is not permissible for her to initiate sex with him, she does not object when Mutt wants to make love and she does not: “Whenever he wanted it and I didn’t, he’d take me, because he knew I wouldn’t say, No, Mutt, or even if I had, sometimes I wonder about whether he would have taken me anyway” (156). Once again, Ursa demonstrates her understanding of the male authority over her sexuality. Audre Lorde discusses the tendency of relationships within the Black community to “operate to the benefit of Black males,” and the way this mimics master/slave relationships which “were always those benefiting the master” (“Sexism” 65). This notion calls attention to a harsh connection between Ursa’s past and present. Whether or not Mutt would force sex upon Ursa against her will, Ursa imagines that he would because that is the paradigm of sexuality that was conveyed to her by her ancestors. The woman serves as the sexualized object, wholly enslaved by male desire.

By focusing on Ursa’s sterilization, Jones emphasizes the link between sex and reproduction, as well as Ursa’s subsequent lack of desire. It initially seems quite apparent that once Ursa is forced into an infertile existence, she is unable to experience any pleasure in sex whatsoever. Upon closer examination, however, it is clear that Ursa’s desire does not completely diminish; rather, it is displaced. Ursa’s complaints about feeling no excitement during sex occur when she is engaged in vaginal penetration, such as, “he was inside and I felt nothing” (82). Also, in another fantasy encounter with Mutt, he instructs her to sit on his lap, to which Ursa responds, “naw, I don’t want it that way” (99). Because she has lost the ability to reproduce, Ursa subsequently loses any desire
for vaginal penetration. However, she does express a desire for alternate forms of sexual pleasure, namely, clitoral stimulation. Thus, Jones details a sexual experience with Ursas second husband, Tadpole, and the ways she can and cannot feel sexual pleasure. When he penetrates her, Ursas says, “I was struggling against him, trying to feel what I wasn’t feeling. Then he reached down and fingered my clitoris, which made me feel more” (75). While Ursas is able to feel pleasure in this scene, it quickly vanishes as Tadpole continues to move inside of her. Distracted by her engagement in this form of sex that she can only associate with reproduction, Ursas loses her desire: “He fingered my clit again, but it was painful now … I kept moving with him, not feeling it now” (75).

Ultimately, Ursas sexual experiences suggest that she is unable to find pleasure in vaginal penetration because she is haunted by her inability to reproduce. Alternatively, she is drawn to clitoral stimulation because it exists purely for pleasure and not for reproduction. Still, because Ursas feels naturally drawn into a heterosexual existence, she is unable to embrace this sexual pleasure. Thus, Jones notes that when a woman is enslaved by compulsory heterosexuality, she is unable to own a sense of her own sexuality, separate from a man and from reproduction.

The sexual education based on compulsory heterosexuality and male dominance that Ursas receives through the example of her ancestors is reinforced from Ursas youth into her adult life. As a child, a neighborhood boy forces himself sexually upon her, touching her underneath her dress (42); as an adult, her boss behaves similarly, feeling her chest without her consent (94). Mutt also works to emphasize Ursas sexual inferiority to him and her lack of voice in their sexual engagements. Yet, he damages her sexuality even further by referencing her existence as his possession, as his sexual object.
He echoes Corregidora: “Your pussy’s a little gold piece, ain’t it, Urs? My little gold piece” (60). In all of these ways, Ursa is objectified by men; the Corregidora women add to her skewed views of sex, but only through their serving as an example of oppressed, sexualized objects. Jones explicitly links Ursa’s feelings of devaluation to the abuse and oppression of Black women during the slave period by making Ursa acutely aware of the sexual abuse inflicted upon her maternal ancestors. In addition, bell hooks makes this connection, noting that “the sexual exploitation of black women … has not altered in the course of hundreds of years” (Ain’t 53). In this way, Jones exposes the severe, lasting effects of compulsory heterosexuality on the female psyche.

Similarly, in It Begins With Tears, Opal Palmer Adisa focuses on prostitution and its impact on the female psyche to illustrate the power of compulsory heterosexuality to destroy women’s sexual lives as well as their relationships with one another. Adisa sets her novel in rural Jamaica, and tells the inter-connected stories of the women who reside there. A central character, Monica, flees Kristoff village at fourteen and heads to Kingston, in pursuit of something larger than her rural village. Monica’s mother recognizes her daughter’s sexual appeal at her young age. Therefore Adisa explains that Monica’s mother stifled her in an attempt to protect her: “At fourteen Monica had the body of a woman. That was why her mother didn’t allow her to go anywhere alone, fearful, like all mothers, that her daughter would be ‘ruined’” (104). Here, Adisa comments on the village women’s perception of female sexuality, suggesting that a sexual encounter with a man could destroy Monica. Through her portrayal of Monica, Adisa suggests that prostitution aids compulsory heterosexuality in damaging female desire.
Adisa’s focus on prostitution highlights many problems caused by compulsory heterosexuality. She illustrates that prostitution defines a woman’s worth as only in her sexual body, and sex exists only to please the man. These notions create relationships based entirely around male satisfaction and female desire is consequently neglected. Additionally, prostitution requires women to depend completely on men. Through Monica’s life as a prostitute, Adisa illustrates the way she is compelled into a naturalized heterosexuality. Prostitution is ultimately a compulsory heterosexual institution which skews a woman’s perceptions of sex. Monica’s views of sexuality, as affected by her life as a prostitute, cause her to be completely dependent on men. She is unable to value herself separate from a heterosexual relationship since she defines herself and her body as male possessions.

Like Jones, Adisa likens the dynamic of the relationship between a prostitute and a pimp to that of a slave master and his slave. Once Monica arrives in Kingston, she is quickly spotted by a pimp for her “mixture of innocence and sexuality” (104). Although Adisa does not directly connect Monica’s sexual experiences to the times of slavery, the connection is implied by this description. Historian Page Smith notes the way the innocence and submission of female slaves appealed to their masters:

Since there seems to be in masculine sexuality a measure of aggressiveness and even sadism, passivity and defenselessness seem often to enhance the desirability of the sexual object which was what the Negro woman was for her white masters. (qtd in hooks Ain’t I a Woman 29)

Likewise, Adisa associates Monica’s experience to that of a female slave, by noting the pimp’s attraction to Monica. Ultimately, Adisa shows that the compulsory heterosexual
paradigm of domination/submission and aggression/innocence is derived from the legacy of slavery.

Adisa also shows that Monica is well aware of this master/slave dynamic, and of the worth of her body to a man. Monica recognizes that her position as a young virgin makes her valuable to the man and considers this an asset. Even at her young age, she understands the binary gender roles of men and women, is eager to submit to them, and thereby falls into a compulsory heterosexual fate. Adisa reveals just how pervasive this compulsion is when she describes Monica’s decision to “surrender her virginity” to a pimp because he “fit her image of a man” (105). Additionally, Adisa demonstrates the way compulsory heterosexuality causes a woman to feel a false need for a man, as well as her quickness to exchange her body for his companionship. Adisa highlights the way prostitution leads a woman into a naturalized heterosexuality, one in which the woman is eager to exchange her body for male attention.

While Adisa presents Monica with an early dependence on men and an understanding of her sexuality as a powerful tool in obtaining male attention, she also comments on the way prostitution later impacts a woman’s overall perception of relationships and sexuality. As an adult, Monica returns to Kristoff village with her sexual miseducation. Already accustomed to having sex with married men, it is easy for Monica to enter into an affair with Desmond, Grace’s husband. Just as easily, too, Monica is able to dispel feelings of remorse for the affair. Prostitution for Monica emphasized an importance on sexual relationships with men, while disregarding female friendships. Through this situation, Adisa comments on the ability of compulsory heterosexuality to prevent female friendship. Monica’s sexual experiences with men and
her great dependence on them, causes her to ignore the value of female bonding in favor of compulsory heterosexuality:

[Monica] was not going to give up Desmond. Damn, blast the consequences. She had always done as she pleased and she wasn’t going to change now. Other women played by the rules, but she made the rules as she went along. She put away the mop and dust cloth and went to the bathroom. Before turning on the shower, she talked to herself in the mirror. ‘Chow! Grace had Desmond all dis while and neva know wha fi do wid him. Is my turn now. Me no care who don’t like it.’ (127)

Adisa illustrates that, for Monica, compulsory heterosexuality instills a sense of competition toward other women. Monica determines her personal worth by stealing men from other women. Yet, compulsory heterosexuality also robs Monica of agency in her sexual relationships. She seeks pleasure from sex, but is unable to realize any benefit from a lasting relationship with a man. In this way, Adisa notes that compulsory heterosexuality can also release a hypersexual impulse within a woman that still works to limit her both sexually and emotionally.

Adisa also presents the skewed perceptions of sexuality that are held by the other women of Kristoff village. These women, too, are victims of compulsory heterosexuality since they view the purpose of the female body as a reproductive machine, one void of desire. The women of Kristoff village look down on Monica for having sex for pleasure and for not reproducing. For instance, a married woman of the community, Peggy, looks on with disgust when Monica returns to Kristoff village:
[Peggy] had two boys, and had been thinking about a third child lately.

Monica didn’t have any children. Her body hadn’t gone through any wear and tear. She was barren. All she did was fuck men, other women’s men.

Bitch. Whore. Curse her womb and her pussy. (63)

Both Peggy and Monica view other women as competition for men, which does not allow them to engage in female bonding. However, most significantly here, Adisa comments on the purposes of sex. Neither Monica nor Peggy has witnessed examples of sexual reciprocity, which make them unprepared to enter into such a relationship. While their perceptions of female sexuality place too much emphasis in opposite areas, Monica and Peggy are alike in that they disregard the need for female friendship, and define themselves as possessions of men.

Through her depictions of Monica’s prostitution and the flawed relationships of the women of Kristoff village, Adisa comments on the ability of compulsory heterosexuality to dictate women’s lives. Prostitution initiates a naturalized heterosexual existence, which ultimately creates a strong dependence on men in the lives of women. Adisa shows that this need for a man harms women both sexually and emotionally. Compulsory heterosexuality exists to satisfy the needs of men, and the women’s sexual pleasure is therefore sacrificed. Also, Adisa comprehensively presents the havoc that compulsory heterosexuality causes in the relationships between women. When women view one another as competition for male attention, they are unable to form healthy friendships.

Pearl Cleage, in *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, also attends to the topic of privileged male desire and the competition that exists between women for male
attention. Cleage’s story is of Ava Johnson, an HIV-positive young woman who returns to her hometown of Idlewood, Michigan, which is consumed by drugs, sex and teen pregnancy. Through the relationships that exist in Idlewood, Cleage comments on the way naturalized heterosexuality defines the female body as the man’s possession, as well as the female acceptance of this situation. In such an environment, a woman’s worth is determined by her sexual body and by her willingness to submit to a man. Even in sexual situations, Cleage depicts the woman as powerless. However, because compulsory heterosexuality deems the female body as a male possession, Cleage shows that a woman can only please her man sexually by granting him complete control over her. Cleage illustrates the way compulsory heterosexuality can ruin a community through substance abuse and unwanted pregnancy, while also making female bonding an impossibility.

Cleage comments on the tendency of women to learn to define themselves as subordinate to men through their family and their environment. In particular, she emphasizes the powerful effect a woman’s immediate community has on her view of life, love and sex. Early in the novel, Cleage shows the connection between a woman’s attitude toward the aforementioned issues and her family environment through a brief discussion of Ava’s parents. Essentially, Cleage suggests that a woman learns from the examples of relationships that she witnesses. For Ava, the dynamic of her parent’s relationship taught her that men and women should occupy the roles of domination and submission. Ava recalls, “My mother, as usual, never questioned a word [my father] said” (25). Cleage suggests, too, that Ava’s understanding of the dynamic of her parent’s marriage dictates her future relationships. Ava does not have an example of a
healthy heterosexual relationship, one in which the man and the woman are equally active participants. Therefore, Ava is taught early that women are meant to submit to men.

In addition to family, Cleage illustrates that a woman’s community also has a great hand in shaping her attitude toward relationships. The town of Idlewood is governed by strict compulsory heterosexuality. As teenagers, the girls of the town become lost in a world of drugs and sex, becoming mothers at an early age. Additionally, these girls recognize their existence as inferior to men, and their bodies as men’s possessions. Cleage illustrates this understanding through Ava witnessing of such a situation. Outside of a liquor store, Ava sees a violent dispute between a high-school aged couple. When Ava and her friend Eddie drive the young girl home, she explains that the argument concerned the couple’s baby: “‘Muthafucka just lying. He know he my baby daddy … Nigga know I ain’t been fuckin’ nobody but him since his ass got here and he can’t give me five dollars a week? What the fuck I’m ‘spose to do for money’” (23)? Through the girl’s explanation of the dispute, Cleage comments on the plight of teenage mothers. Compulsory heterosexuality causes young women to feel obligated to have sex with men, but often, once they become pregnant, the men have no longer have any use for the young women. It is compulsory heterosexuality that grants men this ability to distance themselves from their responsibilities.

In addition to commenting on the women having obligatory heterosexual relations, Cleage shows that compulsory heterosexuality also causes the men and women of Idlewood to view sex as an act meant only for male desire. Unprotected sex is one way of privileging male desire in heterosexual relationships. For instance, bell hooks addresses the link between male desire and unprotected sex by asserting that:
Despite changes in the ways the larger culture thinks about sexuality, many young black females still risk pregnancy because they are responding to the desires of males, usually older, who want not only to be sexual with them but to do so without using condoms or other birth-control devices. (Salvation 101)

Cleage shows that male refusal to use protection results in an abundance of unwanted pregnancies in Idlewood. This problem is a result of compulsory heterosexuality and the pressure it places on women to privilege male desire. One woman explains why her sexual partner refuses to wear a condom: “My old man ain’t havin’ it … he said he can’t feel nothin’ when he use ‘em” (91). Another woman concurs: “My boyfriend say when we get it goin’ good, he don’t wanna stop and put no runner on” (92). Like the women of Jones’s and Adisa’s novels, these women have been taught that the purpose of sex is to satisfy male desire. Therefore, if a condom hinders the physical sensation for the man, these women view it as inappropriate and unnecessary. Compulsory heterosexuality allows for absolutely no focus on female desire or safety.

Cleage also addresses the topic of unequal desire in the relationships of Black men and women by emphasizing the existence of the female body as the property of a man. In particular, she demonstrates this notion of male possession through Ava’s witnessing of a sexual encounter between Frank and his girlfriend, the same couple that fought outside of the liquor store. The couple, along with Frank’s friend Tyrone, comes to Ava’s house after a night of drinking and drugs. Frank and his girlfriend have sex outside of Ava’s house. Their verbal exchange reinforces the compulsory heterosexuality
that governs the men and women of Idlewood, particularly given its emphasis on female
devaluation and the female body as a male possession:

‘Yeah, bitch, come on, bitch. You such a bad-ass, shit-talking bitch, what you got to say now?’

‘Take it all, baby,’ she said, panting. ‘This ain’t nobody pussy but your pussy. Take all of it!’ (175)

The notion of the girl’s body belonging to Frank exceeds mere words. The girl’s agreement with Frank on the subject encourages him to force the girl to prove the fact that he is the sole owner of her body. After Frank finishes with his girlfriend, he asks Tyrone if he wants to have sex with her next. When the girl objects, Frank claims his ownership of her body, stating, “Now, get your ass back in that car and give my boy some of my pussy before you make me mad, you stupid bitch” (emphasis in original 175-76). Through this exchange, Cleage illustrates the way compulsory heterosexuality not only demands heterosexual sex as obligatory, but it also forces the woman to identify herself, her body in particular, as a possession of a man. In a compulsory heterosexual existence, the woman is blatantly devalued and abused, both physically and emotionally, as the male utterly strips her of any sense of autonomy.

Cleage also comments on the way in which a woman’s worth is determined completely by her body and its appeal to men. In Idlewood, a community governed by blatant compulsory heterosexuality, Cleage shows that Ava’s HIV status renders her completely useless. In another encounter with Frank, Ava is labeled worthless because of her disease. In reference to Ava, Frank says, “That’s some death pussy for sure. I don’t need no part of that shit” (emphasis in original 111). Frank equates Ava’s sexual body
with death and indicates that he consequently has no use for her. Ava’s disease causes her to be undesirable to the men of Idlewood, who only perceive women as sexual objects. Cleage ultimately suggests that in a world of compulsory heterosexuality, a woman’s worth is determined by her sexual compliance and by her sexual availability.

Ultimately, Cleage asserts that compulsory heterosexuality has a detrimental impact on the Black community. She accomplishes this through Ava’s interpretation of Idlewood, noting that it is representative of the Black community as a whole: “It almost doesn’t matter what black community you go in now, the problems are exactly the same. The kids are angry. The men are shell-shocked. The women are alone and the drugs are everywhere” (151). This statement is significant in that it explicitly separates the situations of the children, men and women, hinting at the chaos that compulsory heterosexuality causes for the Black community. Ava’s statement speaks to Audre Lorde’s theory that the oppression of women hinders the possibility of Black liberation. Lorde writes:

When Black women in this country come together to examine our sources of strength and support, and to recognize our common social, cultural, emotional, and political interests, it is a development which can only contribute to the Black community as a whole. It can certainly never diminish it. For it is through the coming together of self-actualized individuals, female and male, that any real advances can be made. The old sexual power relationships based on dominant/subordinate model between unequals have not served us as a people, nor as individuals. (“Scratching” 46).
Lorde illustrates that the abuse of women is essentially the abuse of the Black race as a whole, and power can only come to the race once Black men and women unite as equals. Thus, in describing the chaos of Idlewood and by noting the separation that exists within the community, Cleage comments on the same situation that Lorde references.

The authors discussed in this study collectively present the problems that arise from compulsory heterosexuality and its powerful impact on women within the Black community. Their attention to the topics of slavery, prostitution and female inferiority demonstrate the existence of Black women as property that is subjected to manipulation by men. This forced heterosexuality represses female desire, since the women’s lives are organized around male satisfaction and superiority. Through the portraits of their female characters, these authors argue that compulsory heterosexuality damages a woman’s ability to embrace sexual pleasure.

In addition to harming women sexually, however, these authors also comprehensively present the way a naturalized heterosexual existence obstructs female bonding. When male desire and satisfaction is viewed as superior to female pleasure, women value their relationships with men while neglecting female friendship. Additionally, women who are driven by obligatory heterosexuality view other women as competition for the male prize, rather than prospective companions. In this way, Jones, Adisa and Cleage demonstrate that compulsory heterosexuality harms women both sexually and emotionally.
CHAPTER TWO

COMPULSIVE COMPETITION: THE OBSTRUCTION OF FEMALE BONDING

In addition to causing a repression of female sexual desire, it is my contention that compulsory heterosexuality also obstructs female bonding. When an emphasis on relationships with men is instilled within a woman, she is led to devalue friendships with other women. While this forced repression of desire harms a woman sexually, a lack of female friendship harms her emotionally. A woman who is disconnected from other women is unfulfilled and therefore unable to engage in healthy relationships, even those involving men. Thus, bell hooks rightly asserts that: “While romantic love is a crucial part of this journey [to find love] it is no longer deemed all that matters; rather, it is an aspect of our overall work to create loving bonds, circles of love that nurture and sustain collective female well-being” (Communion xxi). An emotionally healthy and fulfilled woman is able to appreciate love in all areas of life, not solely in her relationships with men. Thus, I argue that a woman’s ability to form loving relationships with other women is an integral step in her preparation for entering into other loving relationships.

When the benefits of female friendship are ignored, women are fueled by compulsory heterosexuality as they place a greater value on men and on their relationships with men. Audre Lorde explains this tendency within the Black community, by asserting that: “Instead of joining together to fight for more [freedom], we quarrel between ourselves for a larger slice of the pie. Black women fight between ourselves over men, instead of pursuing and using who we are and our strengths for lasting change. (“Scratching” 51) This phenomenon is particularly evident in the novels
of Jones, Adisa and Cleage. Through the portrayals of their female characters, these authors comment on the competition that exists among Black women when they organize their lives around sexual relationships with men. The authors also speak to the way this lack of female bonding adversely affects various aspects of their lives and their well-being.

In *Corregidora*, Jones explores this link between compulsory heterosexuality and a lack of female friendship while commenting on the tendency of women to relate heterosocially. Specifically, Jones shows that the Corregidora women are able to bond together through the sharing of their stories of abuse, but even that bonding is based on the white salve holder, Corregidora. Lorde discusses the way experiences with men often bring about female bonding by noting that: “[Black women] have banded together with each other for wisdom and strength and support, even when it was only in relationship to one man” (“Scratching” 49). This is the case in Jones’ novel: Ursa and her ancestors benefit and learn from one another, even though it is only in regard to Corregidora. While this is advantageous in ways, Ursa lacks true female bonding outside of the Corregidora legacy, and, as I have noted, it is only through female friendships that a woman can be fulfilled and prepared for healthy relationships.

The emotional deficiency presented by Jones is largely due to the example of compulsory heterosexuality present in the novel. Kathleen Barry’s theory of “male identification” illustrates the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality leads to a lack of female bonding. Namely, “male identification” causes women to: “Place men above women, including themselves, in credibility, status, and importance in most situations, regardless of the comparative quality the women may bring to the situation … interaction
with women is seen as a lesser form of relating on every level” (qtd in Rich 25). Ursa’s life goal and chief responsibility is to “make generations,” which naturalizes heterosexuality within her. As such, she organizes her life around men and relationships with women are thereby viewed as a lesser concern.

Jones also illustrates the extent to which naturalized heterosexuality is related to homophobia. She comments on the threat of lesbianism, showing that compulsory heterosexuality instills a fear of alternate sexualities, which ultimately forbids female friendship between a heterosexual woman and a lesbian. Ursa’s one female friend, Cat, is ostracized from her life once she learns that Cat is a lesbian. Lorde explains that a heterosexual woman’s fear of lesbians stems from a general lack of female friendship. In particular, she asserts: “the Black lesbian is an emotional threat only to those Black women whose feelings of kinship and love for other Black women are problematic in some way” (“Scratching” 49). Indeed, Jeffy, the only other lesbian character, poses a physical threat to Ursa, and it is not unexpected that Ursa avoids her. However, Cat is an honest friend to Ursa and allows her to stay at her house after the abusive incident with Mutt. Cat also warns Ursa against rushing into a relationship with her second husband, Tadpole. Still, Ursa ends their friendship abruptly. Lorde’s theory of the power of homophobia is related to Jones’s portrayal of the relationship between Ursa and Cat. Lorde argues that homophobia in the female community works to prevent female bonding. Specifically, she explains: “Homophobia and heterosexism mean you allow yourselves to be robbed of the sisterhood and strength of Black Lesbian women because you are afraid of being called a lesbian yourself” (“I am Your Sister” 258). Likewise, Ursa’s inherent sexual obligation to men causes her to lose her sole female friendship. I
argue, then, that Jones sheds light on a solid link between compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia, which both work to harm women by restricting female bonding.

Additionally, Jones shows that hetero- and homosexual women are unable to come to an understanding about men, because of their opposing sexual orientations. As a lesbian, Cat does not need a man in her life and is therefore able to distinguish between good and bad men. Ursa, however, has been programmed to embrace a compulsory heterosexual existence. This is particularly noted when Ursa blinds herself to the negative qualities in men. Instead, Jones shows that Ursa focuses only on the good qualities of men, since that outlook allows her engage in a heterosexual relationship, which is what she ultimately requires. Cat is free to notice the way both Mutt and Tadpole abuse Ursa, and she tries to make Ursa aware of her blindness to this abuse: “If you didn’t have eyes to see then, you ain’t got eyes to see now.” Appropriately, Ursa replies, “I see what I need to see” (emphasis in original 35). Jones suggests that when a woman surrenders to a compulsory heterosexual existence, she becomes incapable, or at least unwilling, to recognize the danger that men can bring her.

In addition, Jones shows that even when a woman assumes an alternate sexuality, her behavior within that sexuality can still be affected by compulsory heterosexuality. Jeffy, for example, works to control and limit Ursa’s sexuality through a type of predatory homosexuality. Jeffy performs the masculine role, in relation to Ursa, based on the compulsory heterosexual paradigm. Ursa first meets Jeffy when they both stay the night with Cat. Jeffy attempts to force herself sexually upon Ursa, exploiting her body the way men in Ursa’s life do. Jeffy learns this behavior from the example of masculinity to which she is exposed. Through the strained relationship between Ursa and Jeffy, Jones
suggests that compulsory heterosexuality can also harms lesbians, in that it can prevent them from engaging in positive relationships with women if they are plagued by binary gender roles.

These gender roles are not necessarily inherent in the individual, but, as in Jeffy’s case, they are learned from the representations of masculine and feminine roles that they are exposed to within their community. Jones’s ideas on this matter seem inspired by Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, which suggests that gender identity is achieved through imitation. This imitation leads to a comprehension of gender as performance rather than predestination. For Butler, then, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results” (Butler 33). That is, gender identity is not innate in the subject; rather, it develops as it is enacted throughout life. Ultimately, the subject is the effect of, not the cause of, gender expressions (Salih 91). In this way, gender identity, like sexuality, can be forced and thereby contribute to the limitations of compulsory heterosexuality.

Jones shows that when gender identity evolves through a mimetic process, the opportunity for female friendship is again at risk. Jeffy’s attraction to women causes her to perform the masculine role as she has seen it performed before her, and causes her to view all women, even heterosexual women, as potential sexual partners rather than potential friends. In this way, Jeffy behaves much like the men in Ursa’s life, viewing Ursa as a sexual object rather than a desiring subject. She does not feel that Ursa’s consent is required for sexual contact. Furthermore, Jeffy, like the men in the novel, uses power as a tool for sexual control. She assumes the dominant role and says to Ursa, “you
scared of me, ain’t you” (175). Because of the heterosexist limitations forced on her sexual orientation, Jeffy impersonates the masculine role according to the binary gender roles of heterosexuality. According to Butler, this masculinity is not necessarily Jeffy’s true inner identification; instead, it is only a performance that Jeffy delivers. Therefore, Jones presents another way that female bonding is challenged, particularly between hetero- and homosexual women. Ultimately, these rigid gender roles of domination and submission limit women emotionally as they further obstruct the possibility of female friendships.

In addition, Jones suggests that it is compulsory heterosexuality that produces these learned and performed gender identities. Specifically, Jeffy’s masculine identity is the product of her exposure to the masculine/feminine identities that she has witnessed. These rigid gender identities are used to further the interests of patriarchal society. This notion is also treated by French theorist, Monique Wittig, who strengthens Butler’s theory of gender identity and its connection to heterosexuality by noting that, “the binary restriction on sex serves the reproductive aims of a system of compulsory heterosexuality” (qtd in Butler 26). Jones’s novel correlates with Wittig’s theory, since Ursa’s obsession with reproduction is based on the binary gender roles that exist in her heterosexual relationships. Rigid gender identities, then, work to perpetuate compulsory heterosexuality and procreation.

Ultimately, for Jones, there seems to be no salvation for women: both hetero- and homosexual woman are oppressed by compulsory heterosexuality. In particular, the extremes of domination and submission that are portrayed through the female

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1 Jones also implies in the novel that Jeffy may have been subjected to sexual molestation, which can also account for her dysfunctional relationships and confused gender identity.
relationships in Jones’s novel are necessary to reinforce an inherent sexual desire toward
men, and to likewise result in reproduction. For the lesbian characters, as well, there is
no escape. Rather than engaging in relationships with women that eliminate the
heterosexual paradigm – what Teresa de Lauretis calls “the possibility of subject and
desire” – the example of lesbianism in Corregidora is tainted by the repetition of
heterosexuality (emphasis in original 192). This repetition works to perpetuate
compulsory heterosexuality by controlling and limiting Ursa’s sexuality, as well as
Jeffy’s – both are defined within rigid, binary gender roles. As such, Jones shows that
both Ursa and Jeffy are defined by their sexualities and are consequently unable to
become fulfilled through meaningful friendships with other women. Ultimately, female
identity seems to be performative of compulsory heterosexuality.

In It Begins With Tears, Adisa also comments on the tendency of women to
organize their lives around sexual relationships with men, thereby neglecting female
friendships. In particular, Adisa shows that a woman’s decision to value relationships
with men more than those with women causes her to be despised by women and even
punished for her lifestyle. Adisa’s portrait of Monica identifies the way a woman’s
emphasis on heterosexuality and heterosexism can cause her to ultimately lose all
potential female friendships.

Adisa explains the way women neglect female friendship by presenting the
impact of a woman’s early sexual education on her adult life. Specifically, Adisa shows
the connection between Monica’s problematic childhood and her strained relationships
with women as an adult. Although other female characters in the novel – Grace, Marva
and Peggy – are able to form female friendships, Monica’s early lifestyle as a prostitute
teaches her to choose relationships with men over those with women. Additionally, Monica’s sexual miseducation teaches her to compete for male attention and to satisfy male desire, much the same way that the Corregidora legacy teaches Ursa to organize her life. This surrender to compulsory heterosexuality allows Monica to submit to men, even married men, and to ignore the importance of female bonding.

Adisa also attends to the notion of competition that exists amongst groups of women. Rather than bonding together, the women of Kristoff village view one another as being in competition for male attention. Monica’s affair with Desmond, a married man, forces married women to constantly feel insecurity and a sense of competition with other women in general, and with Monica in particular. Adisa notes this rivalry when describing the way women perceive Monica. Perhaps even more disturbed than Grace, Desmond’s wife, are Grace’s friends, Marva and Peggy. Marva, for instance, refers to Monica as: “‘de damn whore. Change everything since she come back.’” Adisa notes that: “Marva was consumed with jealousy and anger” (128). Adisa speaks to the competitive dynamic that exists between the women by noting Marva’s jealousy. Marva is not simply angered by Monica’s promiscuity. Instead, her feelings of anger are complicated by her envy of the attention that Monica receives from men. Adisa shows that Peggy, who asks, “‘You gwane just give up Desmond without a fight?’” is also fueled by a sense of competition with Monica (129). Peggy urges Grace to defend herself and to fight back against Monica, further hinting at the game and competition that exists amongst the women. Adisa suggests that when women are forced into a compulsory heterosexual existence, in which their lives are organized around men, they can only view other women as competition for the male gaze. I submit that, by
prohibiting female bonding, this female rivalry is another example of the way compulsory heterosexuality works to limit women emotionally.

This notion of merciless female rivalry that Adisa presents through the portraits of her female characters is also a popular theme treated in bell hooks’s oeuvre. In particular, hooks notes that girls are taught at a young age to view their female peers as the ultimate enemy:

> Girls compete often to the death, and by that I mean to symbolic murder of one another. All this essential woman-hating behavior continues into adulthood. It is woman-hating because it is rooted in the same fairy-tale logic that teaches us that only one female can win the day or be chosen. (Communion 130-31)

The situation that hooks depicts is exactly the dynamic that Adisa presents in her novel. Monica is the chosen one, since she is the recipient of vast male attention. Grace, Marva and Peggy view Monica as the “winner” in the contest. These women endlessly compare their physical bodies and sex lives to Monica’s situation, thus demonstrating the intense competition that exists amongst them.

Adisa hints at the notion of jealousy of appearance through Peggy’s intense and detailed comparison of her own physical body to Monica’s:

> Even without her glasses, Peggy could see that Monica looked good. She touched her own body after Monica had walked off in the direction of Miss Cotton’s shop, then she went into her bedroom, found the glasses at last on her dresser, put them on and looked at herself in the full-length mirror on the closet door. Monica was at least ten years Peggy’s senior, if
Peggy’s inner-dialogue illustrates that the hatred that the women have for Monica stems, in large part, from their own feelings of insecurity. This insecurity, too, is linked to the compulsory heterosexuality that misshapes the women’s lives. Grace, Peggy and Marva instinctively view Monica as competition for male attention because she is physically attractive.

Compulsory heterosexuality seems to be at fault for the problems that stem from female rivalry. The competition that exists between Monica and her enemies, for instance, is based on the male gaze. Audre Lorde also makes this link noting that: “Black women have been taught to view each other as always suspect, heartless competitors for the scarce male” (“Scratching” 50). Certainly, Adisa’s focus is on Monica as the recipient of the male gaze. Grace, Peggy and Marva hate her because of her sexual relationship with Desmond. Furthermore, these women hate Monica not only because she sustained the male gaze, but also because she stole it from Grace, Desmond’s wife, thus proving that Monica is more deserving of it. This situation also mimics the scenario that hooks references, in which only one woman can be placed in the spotlight, or can be the object of the male gaze. Ultimately, Adisa shows that compulsory heterosexuality presents a world in which women vie for male attention and there can only be one
winner. This dynamic instills within each woman a hatred for her competitors due to the ultimate goal of holding the male gaze, no matter the cost. Adisa demonstrates that the tendency of these women to fight one another for the affection of a man prevents them from obtaining strength and solidarity together.

Through the portrayal of these female characters, Adisa illustrates the severity of Monica’s affair with a married man, as it causes his wife and her friends to sexually assault Monica as a punishment for surrendering to a compulsory heterosexual existence. These women are fueled by hatred and envy, but it is the culmination of these emotions that guide the women on their rampage to punish Monica for her lifestyle and for her emphasis on heterosexuality and heterosexism. Adisa shows that Monica’s punishment is based on her femininity and the things that represent her attraction to the male gaze: “[Grace, Marva and Peggy] pulled [Monica’s] closet open, grabbed out her clothes, went into her dresser drawers, turned out her underclothes, emptied her many bottles of perfume, sprinkled powder in her hair and laughed” (131). The focus of the attack, initially, is on all that makes Monica feminine and sexually appealing, namely, her undergarments, perfume and powder. By emphasizing these items, Adisa suggests that the attack is rooted in jealousy and competition for men. Grace, Marva and Peggy hate Monica for the way she appeals to men, and they are aware that they do not possess Monica’s sexual attractiveness. Thus, in addition to punishing Monica for her actions, the attack is also out of pure jealousy for her ability to capitalize on the male gaze.

Adisa’s portrayal of female competition for the male gaze suggests that women are compelled by compulsory heterosexuality to destroy one another in order to receive male attention. Likewise, hooks notes that:
Since our unique, distinctive traits may not be acknowledged by patriarchy (and most important, by the men in our lives – fathers, brothers, and, if we are heterosexual, lovers), then females may feel as though the only way to get special attention or to be chosen is by diminishing the value of female peers. *(Communion 132)*

Adisa presents the situation that hooks details through the interaction of her female characters, particularly through Monica’s attack. Grace, Peggy and Marva lack the attention that Monica receives from men and they therefore feel that they must destroy her in order to gain power and become the “winners.” The women mock Monica’s sexual appeal by invading her personal items (undergarments, perfume and powder), in an effort to feel more powerful and appealing by robbing Monica of her power, which ultimately comes from her sexual appeal.

Adisa further highlights this notion of female competition by illustrating the way Monica is demonized for being the beneficiary of the male gaze. For instance, Adisa’s description of the attack on Monica quickly focuses on the emphasis on Monica’s overt sexuality: “[Grace, Marva and Peggy] flung [Monica’s] dress over her head and ripped off her panties. One of them shoved her peppered fingers as deep into her womb as they could reach until the cup of chopped peppers was empty and her fingers were on fire” (131). Monica’s punishment is a sexual assault, thus demonstrating the women’s condemnation of her sexuality. The women seek to damage Monica’s sexual self. The pepper makes Monica’s genitals burn as a consequence for her life of sexual freedom.

When Monica is found and cared for by other women of Kristoff village, one woman notes: “[The pepper] all up inna her. We have fi get it out or she gwane rotten” (135).
This comment suggests that the attack on Monica threatens to make her sexually inept. Through this reaction, Adisa suggests that Monica’s attackers sought to punish her sexually in an effort to remove her from the role of their competitor. Again, Adisa focuses on compulsory heterosexuality’s uncomfortable emphasis on the male gaze.

Ultimately, Adisa addresses the link between female bonding and a woman’s preparation for romantic relationships. The inability of the women of Kristoff village to bond together and value one another renders them essentially unprepared to enter into healthy, romantic or sexual relationships. An escape from this predicament relies on my theory of elective bonding, in which women are active agents in relationships. Elective bonding is based largely on relationships with women, by both surrendering to the care of women and providing care for women. Monica’s healing process is initiated by the sense of reciprocity that elective bonding provides. Ultimately, it is through female bonding that women can discover an alternative to the restrictions of compulsory heterosexuality.

While Jones and Adisa focus largely on the problems that arise when compulsory heterosexuality blocks female bonding from women’s lives, in *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, Cleage discusses what happens when women have begun to recognize this significant void in their lives and how they make an effort to fill it. Cleage also acknowledges the link between female bonding and a woman’s overall emotional wellness. Cleage’s Idlewood is a town embedded in compulsory heterosexuality, where women are abused and sexual relationships exist only to fulfill male satisfaction. As is the situation in the communities presented in the other novels, the benefits of female friendship in Idlewood have been long ignored. However, through recognition of the importance of female community, Cleage offers an opposition to the roles of women as
weak and submissive. Her novel also works to define the female journey to independence. Audre Lorde’s identification of the sense of human connectedness is crucial to the road to freedom where: “without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression” (“Master’s Tools” 112). Ultimately, Cleage provides a story of sisterhood through which she explores the possibility of female community surpassing the confines of compulsory heterosexuality.

Cleage uses her setting of the novel to prepare for a story of female community. She opens the story with Ava moving home to Idlewood to spend the summer with her sister, Joyce, after Ava is diagnosed as HIV-positive. Through the relationship between Ava and Joyce, Cleage directly posits the healing impact of female bonding between sisters. Ava is an “outsider” of the desperation that exists in Idlewood. The trauma of her HIV-positive diagnosis causes her to reevaluate her life, and she is therefore in an appropriate position to observe the women of Idlewood and to help initiate change. Likewise, Joyce is recovering from the recent death of her husband, so Cleage positions both Joyce and Ava as recently removed from situations in which they were dependent on men. I assert that Cleage uses the portraits of the sisters to tell her story of the ability of women to initiate change and transcendence of compulsory heterosexuality through female bonding.

In addition to providing alternatives to compulsory heterosexuality, Cleage incorporates the problems that are perpetuated by it. For instance, she discusses the topic of women competing for male attention. Cleage refers to this trend as “man-sharing” and tells the story of two women who are able to remove themselves from situations in which
they are defined by men. The problem reached its peak for these women when “each one was waiting gracefully for the other to get tired of the hassle and bow out gracefully, but neither of them would break and now he was asking them to have three-way sex” (41). Through this suggestion, Cleage shows that this entire situation is guided by compulsory heterosexuality’s focus on male satisfaction. Cleage then shows that it is through an honest confrontation before other women that these two women are able to realize the problems of their shared relationship with one man, and then break away from it. From Ava’s position as the observer, the audience learns that through the women’s candid discussion, “they realized they liked each other a lot more than either one of them liked him” (41). Through this situation, Cleage shows the benefits of female bonding, the possibility of freedom from men, and from a compulsory heterosexual existence.

Cleage suggests that female friendship is most effective when a group of women bond together as a community. For instance, she shows that the women who were able to overcome man-sharing were able to discuss their problems with one another, but also before a group of other Idlewood women. Thus, Cleage presents Joyce’s forming of the Sewing Circle, a group of women that come together to discuss their daily problems with men, early motherhood, and other issues exacerbated by compulsory heterosexuality. The Sewing Circle initiates a community of female bonding that is strong enough to combat the sexual and emotional limitations imposed on the women of Idlewood. Thus, Cleage notes that, “Joyce now had a group of young women who trusted her and were beginning to trust each other” (155). This trust is the beginning of a transition from compulsory heterosexuality to female friendship. Cleage, then, appropriately shows the power of female community to overcome the limitations imposed on them.
For Cleage, a strong sense of female community requires more than a mere forum for group discussion. She expands on the benefits offered from a venue of female bonding by identifying the specific intentions and goals of the Sewing Circus. In order to solidify these ideas, Joyce creates a “Statement of Purpose” for the group:

To create and nurture women who are strong, mentally, physically, and spiritually; free of shackles, both internal and external; independent of the control of other human beings and dogma, religious or political; women who can take care of themselves and their children financially, choose their lovers based on mutual respect, emotional honesty, and sexual responsibility; women who raise their children to be contributors, not predators or parasites. (157)

This statement exists as in opposition to compulsory heterosexuality as an institution. Ava summarizes the statement: “to nurture free independent women who can take care of themselves, choose their lovers wisely, and raise their children right” (157). Through these ideas, Cleage pegs the limitations imposed on women by men and by patriarchy, while also addressing the characteristics of a woman who escapes these confines. Such a woman possesses sexual and emotional wellness in addition to an overall sense of independence. As such, she carefully selects her friends and lovers, and she is not dependent on either. Note that men are not directly included in the Sewing Circle’s statement of purpose, thus Cleage implies that they are not a necessity. This suggestion alone is in direct opposition with compulsory heterosexuality. Finally, the statement addresses the topic of motherhood, showing that in addition to being responsible for
oneself, a woman should also teach her female children to be independent and conscientious, in order to prevent the cycle of compulsory heterosexuality.

Cleage supplements this opposition to compulsory heterosexuality, with a specific record of what defines an independent woman. She details these particulars in Joyce’s “Ten Things Every Free Woman Should Know,” which includes topics such as self-defense, sex education and home maintenance (158). The list promotes female wholeness and independence. It references tasks that are stereotypically defined as male responsibilities in order to position women as accountable for their own survival. Like the statement of purpose, Cleage’s list outlines a self-sufficient, female lifestyle in which a woman can thrive without reliance on anyone else, and particularly without a man. This proposition blatantly challenges compulsory heterosexuality, and through it, Cleage offers hope for women to overcome the limitations imposed on them.

In addition to this general outline of female independence, Cleage provides a discussion specific to sexuality in which she directly offers a strong resistance to compulsory heterosexuality. She accomplishes this through Ava’s additions to Joyce’s list:

1. Don’t fuck with men you don’t like.
2. Bring your own birth control.
3. Practice safe sex every time.
4. If it’s hurting you, it shouldn’t be exciting him.
5. Don’t fake – demonstrate. (160)

Through this supplementary list, Cleage works to position the woman in an active role in sexual relations, which highlights sexual reciprocity. In such a relationship, both partners
are active, desiring agents. This is the ultimate opposition to compulsory heterosexuality, in which women exist only as the desiring subject and the goal is male satisfaction. In a sexually reciprocal relationship, desire and pleasure is mutual. It is only through this reciprocity that women can bond together and embrace sexual and emotional freedom for themselves. This bond has dynamic impact on the community.

I propose that women are enabled to free themselves from the rigid obligations of compulsory heterosexuality through elective bonding, which allows women to freely choose their friends and lovers. Cleage notes that a free woman can survive alone, but relationships are also valuable, as long as the woman is selective. Thus, I posit that elective bonding is in direct opposition to compulsory heterosexuality. The state of elective bonding refers to the point when a woman breaks away from the rigid obligations of compulsory heterosexuality. Elective bonding positions women as active agents, sexually, emotionally and communally. These elected unions are also reciprocal in that each partner freely gives and receives. Cleage’s Sewing Circus provides comfort for the young women of Idlewood, while also encouraging them to take an active role in their lives, including a discerning attitude toward prospective friends and lovers. A woman who allows herself options is in opposition to the world of compulsory heterosexuality, in which she is expected to submit to men and to sexual and emotional limitations.

I submit that when a woman recognizes her inactive role and chooses to embrace a sense of agency in her life, she begins the journey away from the confines of compulsory heterosexuality and into a state of elective bonding. While theorists such as Rich, Lorde and hooks address the benefits of female friendship, I emphasize the significance of selection and agency in these relationships which prepares women to
demand reciprocity in heterosocial interactions. Specifically, by exercising their right to choose their friends and lovers, women permit themselves the agency that compulsory heterosexuality forbids. The three authors in this study present the problems that are caused by compulsory heterosexuality and illustrate the negative effects on female wellness that result when the benefits of female bonding are ignored. Through the portraits of their female characters, they demonstrate that when a woman does not celebrate her femaleness through relationships with other women, she is emotionally unfulfilled and therefore sets herself up to be victimized by men, patriarchal society and the sexual and emotional limitations of a compulsory heterosexual existence. In addition, she risks perpetuating the cycle by allowing her children to succumb to the same limitations. While elective bonding removes women from the confines of compulsory heterosexuality, it is reached through a comprehensive healing process. Ultimately, I believe that the rejection of compulsory heterosexuality begins the journey that leads to elective bonding, and that the effectiveness of this journey depends on the collective strength of female community.
CHAPTER THREE

“THEN IN SINGLE FILE THEY WADED INTO THE RIVER”: THE FEMALE JOURNEY TO ELECTIVE BONDING

While theorists have addressed the topics of compulsory heterosexuality and female bonding, the necessary healing process for heterosexual women has not been articulated. Adrienne Rich, for instance, extensively discusses the problems that compulsory heterosexuality presents, as well as the value of female bonding in a compulsory heterosexual world. Her focus, however, is on lesbianism. For Rich, there are varying degrees of intimate relationships between women, which are measured along a lesbian continuum. Rich recognizes this continuum and the notion of lesbian existence as suitable oppositions to compulsory heterosexuality. However, Rich does not appropriately address the situation of the genuine heterosexual woman. What is the purpose of the lesbian continuum for heterosexual women? How does female friendship prepare a woman for relationships with men?

The sexual and emotional limitations that compulsory heterosexuality imposes on women prove that a healthy, heterosexual relationship is not possible when a woman’s sexuality is socially constructed and when she is not recognized as a desiring agent. By elaborating on Rich’s theory, and supplementing it with the ideas presented by the authors of my study, I suggest that the escape from compulsory heterosexuality is actually a journey in which female bonding is but one component. The goal of this journey is elective bonding, in which a woman breaks away from the rigid obligations of compulsory heterosexuality, enters into an existence in which she is an active agent and chooses her partners in all relationships, both sexual and non-sexual. These elected
unions are also reciprocal in that each partner freely gives and receives. My research suggests that effective elective bonding depends largely on building female community. Further, the process most often is initiated by a traumatic event that propels a woman to surrender to the care of other women and to embrace self-love. Finally, this process gives the “free woman” the ability to care for other women, thereby building a community of women who are free from the confines of compulsory heterosexuality. These steps prepare women to be active agents in all relationships, particularly those with men, in which they denounce compulsory heterosexuality and demand reciprocity.

The authors of this project demonstrate that this move away from compulsory heterosexuality and into elective bonding begins when women are subjected to a considerably traumatic event. Jones demonstrates this through Ursa’s abusive incident with Mutt, which renders her sterile. For Adisa, the traumatic incident is Monica’s sexual assault by a group of other women. Finally, Cleage begins Ava’s journey with her diagnosis of HIV. In each of these situations, the trauma is linked to the women’s negative sexual experiences with men and in this way, the incident aids in the women’s separation from compulsory heterosexuality. Collectively, these authors illustrate that the trauma instigated by a woman’s limited sexual and emotional life triggers her to recognize her oppressive existence and to initiate a move away from it.

Following the traumatic episode, these authors show that women instinctively surrender to the care of other women. The trauma awakens them to the problem with their current situations, and prepares them to accept the care of other women. This is an integral part of the journey into elective bonding because these relationships prove to the women that there is an alternative to their previous obligatory and oppressive lifestyles.
Adisa likens this step of the process to a female re-birth. For instance, after Monica’s attack, she is rescued by a group of women who Adisa depicts as maternal figures. These women have bonded together and have discovered a way to escape the limitations of compulsory heterosexuality. In addition, Adisa reinforces the theme of Monica’s re-birth through a description of one rescuer’s use of her own breast milk to cleanse Monica’s wounds: “Bracing on one hand, [Arnella] brought out a breast, which was hard with milk, and began to express is all over Monica’s swollen inner thighs and blistered vaginal area” (149). Adisa’s incorporation of maternal figures and of breast milk helps in developing the theme of re-birth. Adisa’s thematic presentation of female bonding suggests that women can help prepare victims of compulsory heterosexuality to begin a new life: one focused on elective bonding rather than obligation.

Cleage also attends to the importance of female bonding and the way it initiates a woman’s emotional healing. When Ava returns to Idlewood, she is recovering emotionally from learning of her HIV diagnosis, while Joyce is still recovering from the death of her husband. Through their conversations, Cleage describes the way the two women find solace in each other and help enable one another to recover from the trauma in their lives. Cleage hints at the women’s emotional communion by describing the way Ava concludes a conversation with Joyce: “I reached over and took her hand and squeezed it and we lay there for a while, just looking at the moon and listening to the crickets” (62). In this way, Cleage illustrates that through conversation, the women are able to bond together. In addition, Joyce helps Ava to remove herself from her previous lifestyle that was organized around men and sex. Thus, Cleage suggests that the female healing process relies on a separation from men and an embracing of female communion.
Cleage ultimately shows that the journey to elective bonding is aided by a celebration of femaleness.

Jones also provides a sense of healing through female bonding. After Ursa’s abusive incident with Mutt, Cat welcomes Ursa into her home. Cat nurtures Ursa and contributes to both her physical and her emotional healing processes. Cat provides Ursa with food and a bed, but she also offers Ursa conversation. Jones shows that the female bonding that exists between Ursa and Cat helps to guide Ursa’s journey into elective bonding. Jones also portrays Cat as a maternal figure to Ursa. After Cat prepares a fried chicken dinner for Ursa, for example, Jones explains that Ursa’s thoughts turn to her mother’s preparation of the same meal. Cat allows Ursa to surrender to her care, which offers an alternative to Ursa’s former compulsory heterosexual existence. In addition, Jones later incorporates a scene between Ursa and her mother in which the two characters are finally able to bond outside of the Corregidora legacy. It is emphasized when Ursa’s mother tells the story of Ursa’s birth and of her abusive relationship with Ursa’s father. Jones shows that through this conversation, in addition to her bonding with Cat, Ursa becomes better prepared to welcome loving relationships with women. Ursa’s mother becomes upset when recalling her abusive relationship and Jones shows Ursa’s desire to comfort her: “I went over and put her head on my thighs” (121). This scene is significant because Jones illustrates a relationship between Ursa and her mother that is not organized around Corregidora. Thus, Ursa is able to bond with her mother without focusing on the Corregidora legacy. Although the conversation is about around a man, this scene is organized around female bonding. Jones provides examples of nurturing
bonds between women in order to portray the way that the comfort of female bonding can help redirect a woman’s focus from compulsory heterosexuality to elective bonding.

Another important element of female friendship is sensuality. These authors provide examples of female friendships that are sensual, but not sexual. Cleage, for example, portrays Ava’s hairstylist profession as a vehicle to erotic encounters with women. Ava discusses the sensual relationships she has with her clients: “Most sisters lean into a good shampoo like it’s as welcome as good sex” (81). Cleage shows that Ava shares this relationship with the women of Idlewood, including with Joyce. In one scene, Ava and Joyce discuss the problems of Idlewood and the women of the Sewing Circus while Ava shampoos and braids Joyce’s hair. Through Ava’s discussion of these relationships, Cleage draws on their erotic nature and how they exist as alternatives to compulsory heterosexuality:

I was good at it – the cutting and the listening – and some of my clients came twice a week at thirty to fifty dollars a pop. Now, I like to look good, too, but I think it was only half about looking good and the other half about having somebody actively listen, actively affirm, and actively touch without expecting sex or a home-cooked meal in exchange.

(emphasis in original 80-1)

Thus, Cleage uses Ava’s position as hairstylist to highlight her sensual relationships with women and the way they benefit Ava and the other woman involved. Sex is not a component of these female bonds, yet they exist to satisfy a woman’s physical and emotional needs that are neglected in compulsory heterosexual relationships.
Compulsory heterosexuality teaches women that their bodies and sexuality are meant only for male desire; thus female pleasure is not a concern. Women are then unable to develop a connection with their bodies, and they consequently repress sexual desire. Cleage shows that Ava develops such a connection through self-confrontation. She devotes one evening to herself in an effort to reflect on her life:

I . . . ran a hot bath full of the bubbles I used to save for serious seductions, made myself a good, strong drink, and sat in that water until it got stone-cold, thinking about all the fucking I had done and all the fucking I wasn’t going to do, and I realized that the only thing I was sorry about was that I never had a chance to make love. (emphasis in original 48)

Cleage portrays Ava’s self-confessional as a vehicle to self-love. Without the distraction of men, Ava allows herself to reflect on her past and what she wants for her future. In this way, she prepares herself for happiness and self-love aids her escape from compulsory heterosexuality. Cleage’s view here corroborates hooks’s assertion that “learning to love our female selves is where our search for love must begin” (Communion 104). Ultimately, once a woman is no longer under the oppressive hold of a man, and after she is loved and cared for by another woman, she is free to love herself and enabled to be appropriately loved by others.

Adisa highlights sensuality between women to show the way it helps women connect with their bodies. She shows Monica bond with Desmond’s daughter, Althea, and how that relationship helps Althea discover a comfort with her body. When the two are alone, Monica removes her underwear to which Althea responds: “Sometimes when
it did hot me used to tek off me panties, but one time Mamma find me widout panties and beat me she me turning wukless . . . Is okay if me tek off mine too?’” (203). Adisa suggests that women, as victims of compulsory heterosexuality, often pass on the tenets of compulsory heterosexuality to their children. A negative body image is linked to overall low self-esteem, and as Adisa submits, this anxiety is often perpetuated by mothers. For instance, Nancy Friday explains that “self-loathing begins in earnest, genital abhorrence inherited from her mother who learned it from her mother” (qtd in hooks *Communion* 113). Although it is clear that women are capable of perpetuating the limitations of compulsory heterosexuality, it is also clear that women can counter these limitations by resituating female-to-female relationships outside of the realm of male desire.

By embracing female bonding, women can also contribute to the development of a love for the female body. Note that Adisa shows that through their bonding, women can feel comfortable together and can even share a love for their bodies. Adisa identifies the power of female eroticism in her description of a healing ritual that the women of Kristoff village undertake together. These women take both Monica and Althea to a river to heal and cleanse them. Note the erotic power as the women undress and bathe together:

Monica, who now stood naked, went and helped Althea off with her dress, then walked her over to Miss Cotton, who immediately began to anoint her body. The women all cupped their hands, taking a little of the lotion that Miss Cotton poured into their palms, rubbing it over each other’s bodies. Then in single file they waded into the river. (213-14)
A crucial element of this ritual is the communal touching of the female body that is sensual, not sexual. The women of Kristoff village heal Monica and Althea through bonding and sensuality. In this way, their sense of comfort with one another helps them to become at ease with their own bodies. Through the ritual, Adisa celebrates the female body and female sensuality outside of the confines of male desire. In this way, she demonstrates that elected female bonding allows women to find value in themselves and to embrace an alternative to a compulsory heterosexual existence.

This erotic female bonding then prepares the victimized woman for self-love. In particular, hooks identifies the relationship between a woman’s love of her body and self-love: “As we love the female body, we are able to let it be the ground on which we build a deeper relationship to ourselves – a loving relationship uniting mind, body and spirit” (*Communion* 120). Thus, once a woman is partially rehabilitated from her trauma through sensual relationships with other women, she is able to love herself.

Self-love works to combat compulsory heterosexuality by strengthening the individual while also contributing to the construction of a community of strong women who collectively oppose limitations imposed on them. In *Corregidora*, for example, Jones illustrates the healing power of self-love through blues singing. Jones shows that the blues, for Ursa, is a personal way to both voice her pain and to acknowledge the fears and desires that she had long repressed. Ursa’s singular salvation from her damaged sexuality is her blues singing. Jones corroborates the notion that music exists as a personal antidote in the Black community. The healing power of music is also referenced in hooks’s work. She submits that “the history, life, and work of black musicians” exist as the “blueprints of healing and survival” (*We Real Cool* 148). Jones also speaks to the
healing power of the blues by showing that Ursa can, through her lyrics, voice her pain and desire in a way that she cannot accomplish in any other way: “[music] helps me to explain what I can’t explain” (56). Additionally, Ursa’s music is something that she can claim as her own. When asked if she has “lost the blues,” she replies: “Naw, the blues is something you can’t lose” (97). Jones’s representation of blues music relates to Lorde’s theory of the erotic within women, which she defines as “a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized” (“Erotic” 53). Through singing the blues, Ursa is able to recognize the erotic within herself, the deeper part of her being that is untouched in other areas of her life. Yet, by presenting her experiences through song, Jones shows that Ursa also impacts the female community. Ursa’s lyrics exist then as her contribution to the community, and as a way to voice the problem of compulsory heterosexuality. Thus, Jones notes that female self-love can also work to empower the female community as a whole.

The ability to achieve self-love through the blues is also significant to this discussion because the introduction of blues singing as a whole was liberating to Black people, particularly Black women. Patricia Collins discusses “Black women’s music as a site of the expression of Black women’s self-definitions . . . and these recordings represented the first permanent documents expressing a Black women’s [sic] standpoint” (qtd in Horvitz 253). This self-expression often includes sex and desire. Ursa’s lyrics, in particular, put words to her sexual struggles. When Mutt watches Ursa sing, Jones portrays Ursa’s focus on him in the audience. Likewise, Ursa tells Mutt: “I sang to you out of my whole body,” (46) which is something she cannot achieve through sex. For
Ursa, blues singing gives a voice to the sexual desire and self-love that she had been trained to repress. Ultimately, self-love can also resist compulsory heterosexuality by unleashing a woman’s sense of love and of desire.

The self-love stage thus prepares a woman to love and to mentor other women. These authors present women who have healed to the point in which they are prepared to care for others. Thus, Adisa and Cleage demonstrate that an important part of the journey into elective bonding is the ability to care for another, specifically for a female child. It is important to note that Cleage portrays Joyce mothering new-born Imani, an abandoned baby. It is also significant that Ava’s relationship with the baby strengthens her as well. Ava equates Imani’s need for love with her own need for it, and therefore develops a strong bond with her. Thus, by caring for Imani, Ava prepares herself to love others and to be loved, as well. Just as important is that these female children benefit from the elective bonding that freed their caretakers from compulsory heterosexuality.

A large part of the journey to elective bonding, then, is to liberate other women from the limitations of compulsory heterosexuality, while also healing oneself. Adisa, for example, depicts Monica as assuming a maternal role for Althea, after Althea’s mother abuses her. Previously, Monica valued not having children. After experiencing one abortion and one miscarriage, “she had dismissed both losses with nonchalance: dead children meant fewer complications in her own life and no responsibility” (201). Yet, Adisa also shows that after Monica uses elective bonding to disrupt the legacy of compulsory heterosexuality, she feels compelled to help Althea, who is fifteen and pregnant. Cleage shows that caring for Althea helps strengthen Monica’s ability to love.
Jones also incorporates a woman’s maternal role as a part of the healing process. She portrays Ursa’s blues music as a way for her to mother women. For example, Ursa converts her pain from compulsory heterosexuality and the Corregidora legacy into song, and then shares that experience with other women. Cat asks Ursa to sing to her privately one night and then explains that Ursa’s painful experiences make her music more powerful and comforting, “because it sounds like you’ve been through something. Before it was beautiful too, but you sound like you’ve been through more now” (44). Thus, Jones suggests that women can comfort other women by sharing their experience, thus building a stronger female community. All three authors show that the strong bonds that develop through female bonding help guide the journey to elective bonding. Ultimately, mentoring and loving other women, young girls in particular, is a crucial aspect of rejecting compulsory heterosexuality and heralding a new generation of women who are freed from its grasp. The experiences of being loved by other women, self-love, and finally, caring for other women provides what is necessary to break free from compulsory heterosexuality and to embrace sexual and emotional freedom. The journey to elective bonding teaches women that they deserve options and agency in regard to their relationships.

In addition, I propose that elective bonding is guided by sexual and emotional reciprocity. For example, Cleage offers Ava as an example of a woman who completes the journey to elective bonding which results in her relationship with Eddie, who commits to a loving, sexual relationship with Ava despite her HIV-positive status. Cleage suggests that such a woman is able to recognize herself as a free, desiring individual who demands fair treatment as an active agent in a sexually and emotionally
reciprocal relationship. Cleage specifically notes the required mutuality in a healthy, sexual relationship: “[Eddie] knew how to make me feel good and he knew how to let me make him feel good. That’s the other thing a lot of brothers don’t understand. When it comes to making love, reciprocity is everything” (emphasis in original 146).

Reciprocity, as a component of elective bonding, works to combat compulsory heterosexuality. Relationships in a compulsory heterosexual world are defined by rigid gender roles, in which the woman is preyed upon as the object of desire. However, elective bonding situates both partners as agents. This premise is exactly what hooks emphasizes when she asserts that: “Awakening to love can happen only as we let go of our obsession with power and domination” (All About Love 87). It is clear that elective bonding transcends gender roles in order to allow for reciprocal desire.

It is also particularly important, in these elected relationships, for women to demand sexual agency. Elective bonding is in direct opposition to compulsory heterosexuality, which causes women to surrender to male control over their sexuality. Once women demand agency in their relationships, they become guardians of their own sexual lives. Cleage presents such a situation, in which Ava breaks away from compulsory heterosexuality and embraces sexual independence. Specifically, Cleage illustrates an interaction in which Eddie asks Ava if she wants to sleep with him, immediately positioning her as sexually free and not subordinate to Eddie or any other man. Also, although Ava is HIV-positive, Eddie does not view her as contaminated or worthless, as do the other men of Idlewood. Compulsory heterosexuality teaches men to value women only for what they can offer sexually. Eddie, however, moves away from this compulsory heterosexual paradigm and when Ava confirms that she wants to sleep
with him, he says, “So that means we have to use a condom, right” (139). Again, Cleage shows that Eddie agrees to sex on Ava’s terms, thus positioning her in an active role in their relationship. Through Cleage’s example of an elected, reciprocal relationship, it is clear that female sexual agency is crucial in order to combat compulsory heterosexuality.

While Adisa ends her novel by focusing on female community and the possibility of a sexually reciprocal relationship, Jones ends *Corregirdora* with an explicit example of how important female agency is in sexual relationships that are free from the limitations of compulsory heterosexuality. Ursa positions herself physically in the dominant role while having sex with Mutt, and she verbalizes this to him when she says, “I could kill you” (184). Mutt grabs her and says, “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you,” to which Ursa responds, “I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me neither” (185). By asserting a strong role in her relationship with Mutt, Ursa creates an environment fit for sexual reciprocity. Through this final interaction, Jones illustrates that a free woman escapes compulsory heterosexuality by asserting agency in her relationships.

Once a woman completes her journey away from compulsory heterosexuality and into elective bonding, she has gained the strength and wisdom necessary to demand the respect granted in elected, reciprocal relationships. These Black female authors illustrate that women can disrupt the damaging personal, social and communal consequences of adherence to compulsory heterosexuality. The journey to elective bonding that I describe is essential to the creation of female community. Once a woman can surrender to the care of other women, love herself, and finally care for other women, she is prepared to enter into healthy relationships with men because she has been exposed to alternatives to
compulsory heterosexuality. Female friendship, as depicted by the authors of this study, is the exemplar of the care and reciprocity that exists in loving relationships. In addition, these authors show the way female groups prepare for a communal, societal change in which women break away from compulsory heterosexuality and embrace elective bonding. Thus, I submit that female friendship is the medium through which women can escape sexual and emotional limitations and fully embrace equality and freedom.
CONCLUSION

Compulsory heterosexuality is a tool employed by men and patriarchal society to limit and damage the female opportunity for freedom and equality. This project explores compulsory heterosexuality – which, along with sexism, classism and racism – works to limit and delimit Black women, Black communities and Black communal structures. My focus on compulsory heterosexuality shows the way it teaches women to submit to men in all areas, particularly sexually and emotionally. It also promotes binary gender roles in which the man is deemed superior. In addition, compulsory heterosexuality tricks women into believing that they are permitted no options in regard to their sexuality or their sexual partners. A socially constructed sexuality does considerably more harm than simply dictating sexual partners. The sexual and emotional limitations imposed on women by compulsory heterosexuality also can deny the opportunity for sexual desire, self-love and female friendship. Therefore, when a woman becomes restrained by a compulsory heterosexual lifestyle, her fate becomes one of repressed desire and self-loathing. This project demonstrates that Gayl Jones, Opal Palmer Adisa and Pearl Cleage move beyond a discussion of compulsory heterosexuality by creating characters that choose elective bonding to disrupt its power.

Compulsory heterosexuality prohibits female independence, which suggests that it is altogether contrived from the fear of what Cleage describes as a “free woman.” Lorde also calls attention to this societal fear of a woman’s sexual independence, noting that: “A sexually free woman has always been seen as a tremendous threat, even if she is a heterosexually free woman” (qtd in Cavin 104). In this way, Lorde implies that
independent heterosexual women, like their lesbian sisters, threaten patriarchal power. The lesbian lifestyle is feared by patriarchy because it is not dependent on men. Likewise, the heterosexual woman who breaks free from compulsory heterosexuality also breaks free from male control. She then resolves to organize her life around both self-love and female community, which together work to combat the limitations of compulsory heterosexuality.

Elective bonding challenges the compulsory heterosexual world by granting women a sense of agency and authority. While Rich suggests that lesbianism is the appropriate opposition to compulsory heterosexuality, my study reveals that there is also salvation for heterosexual women. Like Rich, I contend that female love is an integral part of a woman’s realization of sexual and emotional freedom. However, my research shows that female community also works to provide an alternative to a male dominated existence. In particular, female friendship provides reciprocal love, intimacy and sensuality that is impossible within the boundaries set by compulsory heterosexuality. Ultimately, I propose that female bonding leads to elective bonding, which empowers women to demand a sense of agency in their relationships with men, while also ushering in a collective strength for all women.

In addition to strengthening women, elective bonding also has the potential to positively impact the response of the Black community to combat racism. Audre Lorde, in particular, suggests that Black women often hesitate to challenge Black men, and that they fear that their independence will be viewed as “anti-Black” (“Age” 120). Yet, 

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1 Jones notes the connection between independent heterosexual women and lesbians in a final scene between Ursa and Jeffy. She illustrates that Ursa no longer fears Jeffy since, rather than avoiding her, she chooses to have a conversation with her (174-78).
elective bonding proves that free Black women actually assist in strengthening the race as a whole. Love and community are impossible in a paradigm of domination and submission, as demonstrated by compulsory heterosexuality. However, when Black women powerfully demand agency in their relations with Black men, they are teaching men how to treat women. Reciprocal relationships between men and women, within which both partners are active, desiring agents, creates an environment that is appropriate for genuine love and communion. Through such relationships, Black men and women can together confront the racism and sexism that are inherent in white patriarchal society.

While this project enlightens the problems compulsory heterosexuality causes for Black women and details the female responsibility to escape it, the male perspective is yet to be fully explored. Given the recent publication focus on Black masculinity, my research suggests that there should be more attention paid to the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality impacts both heterosexual and homosexual Black men. An understanding of the male perspective of compulsory heterosexuality could further clarify the female journey to elective bonding. In particular, how can men aid the escape from compulsory heterosexuality? And, what role do gay men play? My study details the journey to elective bonding which works to both empower women and build female community. However, this understanding of elective bonding as female salvation suggests that there are other possibilities of resisting compulsory heterosexuality as well. The focus of elective bonding is on the communal, female responsibility. Yet, other perspectives and methods of escape are yet to be explored. Ultimately, elective bonding is but a component of a wider resistance to compulsory heterosexuality that must be considered.
REFERENCES


