Lalita Tademy opens her historical novel *Cane River* (2001) in the year 1834 with the image of a young girl, Suzette, peeing on the rosebushes of Madame Francois Derbanne. Immediately, the exposition flashes back to the events that precipitated this curious act. We learn that today is Suzette’s ninth birthday, that she is a slave who works in the house on Rosedew plantation in Louisiana, that she is slapped in the face for speaking truth, and that her “little girl days are done.” Chapter one concludes with this same image of a peeing Suzette; this time, we

1. In *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, Bernard Bell describes the neoslave narrative genre as “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (289). However, Naomi Morgenstein suggests that Bell’s definition does not accommodate some women authors’ narratives because these texts are more about trauma than they are about the escape from bondage to freedom (107). *Cane River* does not fit Bell’s definition of neoslave narrative. Although Tademy recounts slave life, she does not tell a story of escape; hers is a story of endurance and survival. The characters do not run, but they function and manipulate masters and mistresses within the plantation system. Interestingly, *Cane River* is a traumatized text like Gayl Jones’ novel *Corregidora*; women’s bodies are jeopardized and the family unit is in constant threat of dissolution. Morgenstern, in her analysis of *Corregidora*, writes about the trauma of rape and miscegenation and how these events impact the mothering and notion of racial identity. Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1987). Naomi Morgernstern, “Mother’s Milk and Sister’s Blood: Trauma and the Neoslave Narrative.” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (1996): 101-126.
understand that her actions are not just an affront on appropriate behavior. Instead, we know that Suzette defiles the rosebushes, because Madame Derbanne has slapped her. Covertly, Suzette retaliates against the injustice of her situation. The irreverent image of “pissing”—literally and figuratively—on the status quo provides a framework for reading this fictionalized account of Tademy’s real-life family saga.

From the onset, Tademy insists that we read this narrative as an account of resistance. Suzette and the other central female characters in the novel are not minimized by their enslavement; rather, Tademy suggests, these characters—her foremothers—chip away unnoticed (almost) at the infrastructure of Louisiana’s complex social and racial delineations. However, Tademy, herself, only arrives at this conclusion after more than a decade of uncovering documents and sifting fact from family legend. She tells us that her initial understanding of slavery and of the history of her family was encumbered by her own notions of a homogenous slave system fashioned in the likeness of Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 novel Gone With the Wind (xiv). Tademy’s extensively researched genealogical account dispels the simplistic idea that slavery assumed the same form wherever it took root in the United States. She tells us, “A series of discoveries challenged what I thought I knew about Louisiana, slavery, race, and class” (xii). Furthermore, we learn that these discoveries—the prevalence of miscegenation, the laws established to discourage race mixing, the detailed categorization of race, and the significant influence of free blacks—have altered Tademy’s perception of her female ancestors. Rather than continuing to see these women as tragic victims, Tademy now imagines that they piss—defiantly.

Divided into three parts, Cane River recounts the stories of Suzette, Philomene, and Emily, Tademy’s matrilineal ancestors who were born slaves. Although this division suggests that Tademy will develop each woman as the central focus of her own narrative, what ensues is the development of an ensemble cast of family members who work together to survive and to remain together as a family. The family itself is the protagonist of the novel, and, as such, the importance of kinship is the prevailing motif that provides a coherent narrative thread that drives the plot. Despite the collective voice with which the characters often speak, it is Emily’s individual story that serves as the impetus for Tademy’s research and subsequent decision to document the history of her family.

Tademy, born in 1948 in Berkeley, California, to Nathan Tademy and Willie Dee Billes, grew up hearing fantastic tales about her great-grandmother Emily, who died in 1936, and life around Cane River (an area
surrounding present day Natchitoches). Willie Dee, Tademy’s mother, often described Emily as “an elegant lady, like Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy” (x). However, in the Author’s Note section preceding the novel, Tademy quips, “I always found this last statement impossible to embrace,” and she proceeds to list all of Emily’s shortcomings: snuff-dipper, wine-drinker, unwed mother. Finally, Tademy confesses,

My great-grandmother Emily was color-struck. She barely tolerated being called colored, and never Negro. My mother, the lightest of the grandchildren, with skin white enough to pass if she chose, was a favorite of hers. It is difficult to reconcile these facts and confirm my mother’s judgment of ‘elegant.’ (x)

Disillusioned by her great-grandmother’s proclivity toward the lighter-complexioned members of the family, Tademy questions the legend of Emily. She assumes that Emily’s favoritism denotes a rejection, however slight or unintentional, of the less-white members of the family. Her comment suggests an implicit question: How can her mother embrace this woman who rejects her own blackness? While Tademy’s maternal grandfather, T.O., is light-skinned, her maternal grandmother, Eva, is brown-skinned. Tademy challenges her mother’s—and the family’s—reading of Emily and finds Emily lacking as the ancestral matriarchal figure of her family precisely because of Emily’s ambivalence over color, race, and identity. Tademy’s desire to connect to a more authentic voice leads her to search beyond Great-Grandmother Emily.

“[D]riven by a hunger that [she] could not name,” Tademy, then a vice president and general manager at Sun Microsystems, abandoned Silicon Valley in 1995 to pursue—full time—the genealogy of her Louisiana roots (xi). She invested more than ten years of personally reading court records, deeds, letters, newspapers, and wills and interviewing the people who still lived in the Cane River area. Once, when she had reached an impasse in her own research, she hired a French-speaking genealogist to sort through the numerous official documents written in French. This professional eventually uncovered an 1850 bill of sale for three of her family members, a document that provided Tademy with the name of her Great-great-great-grandmother Elisabeth. She writes: “After finding that Bill of Sale, what had started as an absorbing and interesting project to chart my family’s lineage suddenly became even more personal, in ways I could not have anticipated” (522). Elisabeth, I argue, serves as the more authentic

3. Lalita Tademy was raised in Castro Valley, California and spent summers with her family in Louisiana.
voice Tademy seeks. She traces Elisabeth back to Virginia, and according to records, Elisabeth “appear[s] in Cane River some time before 1820” (521). Tademy does not find immense amounts of archival data on Elisabeth; therefore, the character Elisabeth in the novel is almost wholly a creation of Tademy’s imagination. The name of Elisabeth had heretofore been lost; the family had no collective memory of her. As such, the figure of Elisabeth is a mythical one, hovering over the narrative, even as she stands in direct opposition to Emily.

Tademy establishes Elisabeth as the ancestral figure closest to an African past, closest to authentic Africanness. Elisabeth is a negress. She is “married” to Gerasíme, a negro. Perhaps because she originally lived on a Virginia plantation, she is an outsider at Rosedew and wary of a Creole culture that on the surface appears to be benign or, at least, Christian. In “Creole Family Politics in Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,” Carolyn Vellenga Berman, explicating the domestic ideology and its impact on the French and Spanish characters in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, asserts “Stowe’s Manichean version of America depends upon its Americans who are not American, blacks who are not black and their counterparts, the whites who are not white, in Louisiana.”4 Similarly, Tademy’s novel revolves around this notion of hybridity. She writes about characters that look white but who are enslaved because the community can document the traces of Negro blood running through their veins. She writes about open relationships—not rapes—between white French Creoles and enslaved as well as freed black women. However, the character Elisabeth neither readily embraces nor immerses herself into this hybrid culture. Instead, she resists. She refuses to learn “good” French; she tells stories about her Virginia past, a past that is presumably markedly different from the way of life along Cane River. Elisabeth, then, stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from her great-granddaughter Emily Fredieu, who is mostly white in appearance and who partners with Joseph Billes, a Frenchman, post-slavery. Subsequently, the narrative of the whitening of the generations descended from Elisabeth and Gerasíme frames Tademy’s novel. While Elisabeth figuratively and, perhaps, literally legitimizes Tademy’s connection with and relationship to the slave past, the experience of Emily, a white woman in many respects, complicates Tademy’s reading of slavery and of race in the United States. Thus, as we follow the story of Tademy’s foremothers through Elisabeth,

4. Vellenga Berman states that the term “creole” has different definitions and “designated colonial subjects (crucially, both settlers and slaves) raised in the settler-slave colonies” (329). “Creole Family Politics in Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.” Novel. Summer 33, no.3 (2000): 328-352.
Suzette, Philomene, and Emily, we, like Tademy, find ourselves critiquing concepts of racial identity and kinship. I certainly do not suggest that Tademy, through the character of Elisabeth, is attempting to recover her blackness; however, I am proposing that, through the narrative, Tademy acknowledges a racial loss and comments on the transformation from a visibly black enslaved family to a visibly white enslaved family. The novel points to a moving away from an identity labeled as Africanness or blackness towards an identity more akin to hybridity and, even more significantly, to Americanness. It is important to reflect how, in the context of the nineteenth century, this hybridity functions to inform, influence, or impair motherhood and mothering. Already lacking maternal agency because of their enslaved status, Suzette, Philomene, and Emily raise children who are increasingly white and decreasingly connected visually and experientially to their ancestors’ racial experiences.

**Elisabeth and the Trope of the Web**

Echoing throughout *Cane River* is the mythical voice of Elisabeth. Elisabeth’s refrain, “we’re all in the same web, waiting for the spider to get home,” serves as the narrative thread connecting generations of Tademy’s family to the peculiar institution of Louisiana slavery. The web and spider aphorism, probably more Tademy’s creation than an actual folk wisdom passed down since slavery, serves as a trope, first, to explain how her family managed to remain relatively in tact during slavery, while other families were split apart entirely, and, second, to suggest that the system of slavery (the web) ensnared all—black, white, enslaved, free—who failed to recognize the power of the slave owner and the precariousness of their own conditions. A third reading of this trope is, perhaps, one in which both the system and the creator or manipulator of the web are fluid conceptions of a more general power dynamic.

On the surface, the spider-web trope simply addresses the sense of community and the importance of family Tademy sees as integral to the slave community’s survival. Literally and figuratively, the family members and the extended family members, including non-biological kin and free blacks, must cleave to one another; they must cling to this particular web of slavery and construction of race because the world outside of Cane River presents unknown dangers. Elisabeth, who was sold away from her children in Virginia, knows the trauma of being sold away from family and implores her Cane River children to hold tight to this community and to its people. Maintaining this connection is the central focus of the characters in the novel—not escaping to freedom. Tademy
writes that “when [Elisabeth] was almost through with this life, having put in over eighty-five years, weathering all the changes that came her way, good and bad. Tossed about from here to there, and still she kept going, waiting for the spider to come home. There had been two things that sustained her along the way and made the letting go bearable. One was her God, and the other was her family” (362). The web, though the source of the family’s oppression, is also the netting that holds the family together. Moreover, knowing one’s place in this web is crucial. Elisabeth is firm with Suzette, who, at the beginning of the novel, is too young to recognize the visible and the invisible dangers permeating the air of Rose Dew, the plantation owned by Louis Derbanne. When Madame Francoise Derbanne, the mistress of Rose Dew, slaps Suzette for saying that the master had been drunk, Elisabeth tells Suzette that her “little-girl days are gone” (12). Suzette has forgotten her place with Madame, despite the fact that forgetting your place is dangerous, and Elisabeth knows that youth cannot excuse Suzette’s effrontery. Elisabeth scolds, “How many times have I told you to keep that mouth from running? ... There is no fair. Just do your work, Suzette” (12). While the web of their lives is unfair and its strands tenuous, the family and friends stuck to it make life along Cane River tolerable.

A second reading of this trope reveals Tademy’s more gendered examination of slavery. The web not only illustrates the analogous relationship between the institution of slavery and the enslaved, but also signifies the very specific circumstance of living life as a slave and a woman. Elisabeth’s maxim implores us to anticipate the worst, but to prepare for the best possible outcome. While the first reading of this trope attests to the overwhelming power of the spider, the evil master, a second reading of this spider-web comparison intimates that its victims, though trapped, are not helpless. These women await the return of masters to the plantation and to their beds, and they prepare themselves for survival. They plan. They maneuver. Thus, at this level, waiting for the spider to get home is not an acceptance of fate; instead, it is a proclamation of resistance. Tademy’s spider stands in direct contrast to standard poetical usages of the spider as a creative force: her spider is a destructive force. For instance, in Walt Whitman’s poem “A Noiseless Patient Spider” and Emily Dickinson’s poem “A Spider Sewed at Night,” the spider is both a philosopher and an artist; his web is a canvas for the soul and for life. He is the hero of his own creation.5 In Tademy’s metaphor, however, the

5. I use these two late nineteenth poems to highlight Tademy’s less positive configuration of the spider. I do not suggest that Tademy’s version is a direct response to or inversion of either of these poems by Whitman and Dickinson.
spider is not a creative force; he is a destructive force whose power must be acknowledged. Moreover, in Tademy’s narrative, those caught in the web are the heroes. Tademy illustrates the precarious nature of both the spider and the web when she describes a Christmas morning in 1834. Young Suzette is disgruntled because she and her mother, who work in the house, do not get the day off like the field slaves. Elisabeth tells her: “Don’t try to match up one misery against another…Field or house, we’re all in the same web, waiting for the spider to get home” (34). Elisabeth warns Suzette of the dangers of divisiveness. Each slave’s experience with slavery is different; however, their collective experience binds them. Elisabeth recognizes the class divisions of the plantation, and she subtly reminds Suzette that believing her position in the house affords her a higher status is an assumption she cannot afford to make. Realistically, a master or mistress could downgrade any house servant to field hand for the least of offenses. A slave’s position was tenuous, and punishment could be doled out arbitrarily. During the same conversation, Suzette refers to the field hands as “them.” Elisabeth quickly corrects her: “Let us blow off steam… We’re all in the same web” (36). Elisabeth’s metaphorical web illustrates for Suzette the intricacies of existence on the plantation.

Later in the novel, Tademy further illustrates the overwhelming power of the web and the spider when she discusses the strategy Philomene, the mulatto daughter of Suzette, devises to reunite the family after most have been sold away from Rosedew between about 1855 and 1860. Philomene’s plan for actualizing that vision involves submitting to the relentless appeals of Narcisse Fredieu, a white man. Horrified by the thought of another of her daughters being at the will of a white man, Elisabeth advises her granddaughter to appeal to Madame Oreline, their mistress, for help. Philomene responds bitterly: “Madame Oreline was the one who sold Clement… she makes menu choices, and sets up social affairs. She can appeal to a husband, but she is in the spider’s web along with the rest of us, like you always say. Waiting for the spider to get home” (217). Madame Oreline’s whiteness does not exclude her from the web; she, like them, is a woman without power. Tademy suggests here that white women, too, are trapped in this web or system of oppression; gender seems

to negate the privilege of whiteness—at least to some degree. As such, Philomene recognizes that she wants things Oreline’s favor will never bring: “Freedom. Land. Money. Protection” (217). Limited by her circumstances, Philomene turns to Narcisse, the current spider, and attempts to forge a more favorable outcome for her family.

The third reading of this trope subtly alludes to the archetypal pattern of the trickster figure. In this pattern, the trickster figure, represented by such characters as Brer Rabbit or John, manipulates the larger more powerful animals in an effort to get food, survive, and obtain power or status. Tademy does not seem to draw her spider figure directly from specific literary or folk traditions; however, indirectly, she signifies upon the Anansi or the Nancy spider tales that are integral to the orature, i.e. the formal body of oral literature, of the Caribbean. In this reading of the spider-web trope, the women act as trickster figures, luring white men into a web of the women’s own creation. When Philomene accepts Narcisse’s advances, she exchanges her body for better living quarters and his promise to take care of his “quality” children. She manipulates Narcisse by telling him of glimpsings, supernatural visions of the future. Narcisse eagerly accepts the lies his mistress weaves; in this way, Philomene’s acumen is reminiscent of the creative forces of Whitman’s and Dickinson’s spiders and, even, of the deceptive genius of Homer’s Penelope, weaving and unweaving the shroud to protect her home. Through her weaving of a narrative, Philomene assumes responsibility for her soul and for her life, and in doing so creates opportunities for her own survival. She trades her love of Clement, her husband sold away to Virginia, for the protection of Narcisse. In this respect, she is also like Anansi; just as Anansi understands and professes that speech and wisdom belong to everyone, Philomene realizes that though she may be in someone else’s web, she is free to speak even if it must be in symbolic ways.

Nevertheless, Philomene’s trickery can only garner her financial gains and relative security; her glimpsings are not powerful enough to secure

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6. Erlene Stetson asserts, “Authentic Black female slave narratives, such as Annie L. Burton’s Memories of Childhood’s Slavery Days and Amanda Smith’s Own Story, are almost total in their identification with white women. They do not seem to confuse the covert or overt complicity and acquiescence of some white women with the often tyrannical and incestuous behavior of the master.” Stetson, “Studying Slavery: Some Literary and Pedagogical Considerations on the Black Female Slave,” In All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, Barbara Smith (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982): 78.
freedom for her children. The whiteness of her children’s skin is also inconsequential. Although Narcisse fully accepts these children as his own, the children remain the property of Joseph Ferrier, Madame Oreline’s husband. Whiteness, then, provides the offspring with more acceptability, but whiteness does not legitimize them. Ultimately, Philomene’s role as the spider and architect of her own web is minimal and, certainly, illusory. Indeed, perhaps one of the most obvious narrative flaws in the novel is Tademy’s inconsistent treatment of her primary trope: the spider-web. Rather than trust that this initial metaphor is solid enough to tell the story of her mothers, she, instead, employs a number of disparate metaphors to explain the intricate relationships shared among her maternal ancestors. Her garden metaphor, for example, is reminiscent of Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. Tademy writes, “If Emily was the bloom in Philomene’s garden and Elisabeth the root that reached down deep enough to anchor itself and search for nourishment, Suzette had been the soil itself, buffeted by winds, withstanding storms, baked by the sun” (489). In this scene, Tademy suggests that each of these women have played distinctive roles in nurturing the family so that Emily and future generations might live a better life. Emily, then, is the fruit of their labor. While we certainly recognize that Tademy configures the character of Philomene as the creative force in the novel, the garden metaphor disrupts the spider-web trope that Tademy sets up as the model through which to read her family’s experiences. The image of a garden nourished enough to produce a bloom diverges from the paucity of the web image. However, Tademy is, literally, in search of her mothers’ gardens; thus, the metaphor should not be dismissed merely as evidence of Tademy’s novice status as a writer. Instead, we must remember that the novel is a fictionalized and subjective account of Tademy’s foremothers. Like Walker, Tademy is attempting to find her own voice and creative power. When she has the character Philomene whisper, “Bloom where you’re planted” into the ear of an infant Emily, we realize that the doubleness of that statement articulates Tademy’s personal ethos and artistic vision. On one level, Philomene, the character most knowledgeable of African American spiritual practices, is calling on the spirit of Gerasíme, her grandfather who has just died, to ensure that this newborn stays alive in this world. On another level, Tademy is foreshadowing what she already knows to be true: Emily and her descendants will thrive despite the difficult circumstances of their lives. The garden metaphor is not entirely disjointed from the spider-web trope; it, like the first reading of the spider-web trope, asserts that individuals must find strength in the
bonds of family. Therefore, the garden where they are planted is synonymous with the web within which they are trapped.

The Rape of Suzette

One of the defining moments in the novel is the rape of Suzette. When we first meet Suzette, she is a child defiantly peeing on her mistress’s rosebushes; three years later, we see her as a twelve-year-old vulnerable to the world around her. Wandering away from the Christmas party, Suzette is accosted by Eugene Daurat, a friend of the Derbannes. That night, Daurat rapes Suzette: She is wearing the same white dress she wore to her Catholic confirmation. Tademy makes a point of noting the details of the dress and the ceremony so important to Suzette. For Suzette, confirmation and its symbol, the dress, afford her an opportunity for moral autonomy—a state denied most female slaves. After the initial rape, Eugene Daurat continues to demand sex from Suzette, but she remains silent until Elisabeth confronts her in the cookhouse one day. Elisabeth already knows Suzette is pregnant. Reluctantly, Suzette reveals her secret, and Elisabeth reproves her for her silence: “The world didn’t start with you, Suzette. I’ve been through it. In Virginia, with the Master’s son, before coming here” (49). Elisabeth, as a young woman, was raped; she, too, gave birth to her rapist’s child. Although Elisabeth is upset that Suzette hid this horror from her, mother and daughter now bond, ironically and unfortunately, over their shared experience of rape. No longer angry, Elisabeth tempers her verbal assault with the softness of mother love:

“Did he hurt you?”
“Not much after the first time. I don’t know. He chose me.”
Elisabeth let out a low moan, a strangled sound steeped in resignation.
“Oh, baby girl,” she said. (49)

Although Elisabeth is both furious at Daurat and frustrated by Suzette’s naïveté, she reassures her daughter that family makes sorrow palpable: “This is what our life is, baby girl. It didn’t stop me from loving those babies of mine in Virginia” (50). Suzette learns, first hand, the lesson of her mother’s mantra. The spider preys on women like her; she must find some way to avoid being devoured.

In Black Feminist Thought, Patricia Hill Collins asserts that “African-American mothers place a strong emphasis on protection, either by trying to shield their daughters as long as possible from the penalties attached to their race, class, and gender status or by teaching them skills of independence and self-reliance so that they will be able to protect
Elisabeth does both for Suzette: She protects her daughter as much as a slave mother can, and she prepares her for the hardships sure to come. Elisabeth’s mothering of Suzette, then, is limited by the physical threats of rape and separation. She cannot afford to coddle her baby girl in this hostile environment. Now that the worst possible outcome has occurred, Elisabeth must ensure that Suzette is strong enough to move into her new role as mother.

Rape and the threat of rape distinguish the experiences of black women from black men in slavery, and Tademy develops the theme of violation in different forms throughout the novel. Eugene Daurat’s assault on Suzette destroys her dream of respectability and cancels out any hope she had that the free-born Nicolas might ask her to marry him one day. In addition, Tademy keenly assesses the added danger that awaits Suzette’s child: a mulatto woman will be more desirable and more at risk because her features will be perceived as less negroid but still exotic. Suzette, herself, buys into the notion that her daughter Philomene is more “quality” because she is more white. Suzette internalizes the pathologies of racist discourse and attempts to impose her color-struck ideas onto Philomene who resists and grows up to marry the dark-skinned Clement. Yet, Philomene, too, will be pursued by a white man, Narcisse Fredieu, and she, too, will eventually succumb to his power over her. Thus, the cycle of miscegenation begins—a cycle that lessens the social space between the blacks and the whites and complicates the web of slavery through the complex kinship ties that develop.

Tademy is concerned about this perpetual whitening of her family and raises important questions regarding the shifting dynamics of identity and kinship within the family unit. To some extent, she is even critical of this watering down of the African gene pool. In the final chapters of the novel, for instance, when she describes T.O., her grandfather and one of the sons of her great grandmother Emily, she writes,

T.O. himself, along with his brother and sisters, and his mother, for that matter, could have passed for white anywhere in the country, anywhere except for this part of Louisiana. His background dictated that he marry an as-yet-unnamed but clearly defined wife who would bring more of the same to the table. White skin, light eyes, straight hair, Catholic upbringing. And fertile, so the next generation could put even more distance between themselves and Negroes and come closer to white... Generations had been sacrificed for his look. (491)

The word “sacrifice” reveals the character T.O.’s ambivalence about his color and Tademy’s own lament over the loss of a clearly articulated racial identity. Tademy reads the rape of Suzette as the impetus forcing the family further away from Elisabeth and an identifiable Black identity and toward Emily and the incongruent conflation of blackness and whiteness. The character Suzette is complicit with this whitening and suggests that the whitening of the family denotes progress. T.O. eventually rejects his duty to continue the whitening of the generations and chooses to marry Eva Brew, whom Tademy describes as an English-speaking Baptist woman with “[n]appy hair parted down the center and pulled back tightly in two coiled braids, accentuating the pretty roundness of her face” (493). T.O. ends the obligatory cycle of whitening, and, as a result, reifies the black racial identity of the family.

**Philomene’s Glimpsings**

Asked whether Philomene was purported to be gifted with foresight, Tademy asserts that she imagines Philomene as having this power. Maybe family legend attests to Philomene’s “glimpsings” of the yet-to-come, or maybe this gift is a total invention of the author; either way, Philomene is the most fleshed out character in the novel. Creative and sensitive, she stands in stark contrast to her mother, the pragmatic and stoic Suzette. Philomene’s name invokes the Philomela of Greek mythology whom the gods turn into a nightingale to put an end to her suffering, and like the nightingale, she sings a beautiful but haunting warning to those about whom things are revealed to her in her glimpsings. Here, despite the Eurocentric allusion, Tademy draws upon the mythic consciousness of the African American community and the dynamics of its oral tradition. Elisabeth, still invested in a mythic consciousness informed by magic and the supernatural, does not doubt Philomene’s glimpsings; instead, she encourages Philomene to trust in her visions. Elisabeth concludes that the glimpsings can protect Philomene and the family. Philomene’s third eye does predict the fulfillment of her desire for a life with Clement and the loss of that family; however, in the tradition of the Greek tragic heroine, Philomene fails to interpret fully the meaning of her vision and, as a result, she is blind-sided by events beyond her control. While Tademy does not posit a direct connection to conventions of Greek tragedy, she does intend, however, for the reader to understand Philomene’s visions as foreshadowings of hope and healing. Philomene’s glimpsings move the
Yet, Philomene’s glimpsings cannot shield her or her family from the harsh reality of Cane River, and the frequency of these glimpsings decreases as life takes its toll on Philomene. Although the glimpsings occasionally provide Philomene with an advantage over her oppressors, the visions alone cannot protect her from the sexual advances of white men. Narcisse Fredieu “looks” at her and questions her choice to marry Clement. He tells her that he can give her a protection that Clement cannot. Firm in her belief that her union with Clement is meant to be, Philomene is careful in her rejection of Narcisse’s advances. Early on Philomene recognizes “When submission was demanded, the outward signs of submission were always offered. It was a well-polished survival technique, and Philomene used it especially carefully with Narcisse” (141). Knowing Narcisse’s power over her, Philomene invokes the names of Monsieur Ferrier, her master, and Eugene Daurat, her father, in hopes of dissuading Narcisse. Narcisse tells her “I will be at the wedding. I have an interest in you. Don’t ever forget that!” (144). For the enslaved woman, marriage is no protection from unwanted sexual advances. When Philomene turns to Suzette for advice on how to handle Narcisse Fredieu, Suzette brusquely replies, “You ask the wrong person” (147). Some lessons Philomene must learn for herself; moreover, Suzette, herself, does not have an answer.

After the death of Monsieur Ferrier in 1857, Madame Oreline, the childhood-playmate-turned-mistress of Suzette, sells Clement to pay off her husband’s debts. In protest, Philomene, a new mother, stops speaking: she has no words to express her sorrow. She, like her mute Aunt Palmire, whose children were also sold away, withdraws from the terror of her reality; unlike Palmire, Philomene is rendered silent because of her powerlessness not because of a physical disability. She refuses to use language even with the twins, Bet and Thany, and resorts to pointing and other “primitive” gestures as a means of communicating: “Philomene wouldn’t allow herself words, even with the babies. There was a freedom in not talking, an extra corner of calm to be gained by not having to participate fully in a world without Clement....There was no place to go, except silence” (197-198). Philomene’s silence is an act of subversion and resistance. She collapses language and seizure control over her voice. In this silence, she is free; in this silence, she is in power. Oreline cannot compel Philomene to speak; language is beyond her power over Philomene. Philomene’s despair is visceral; her silence rebukes Oreline.
Emotionally and physically vulnerable, Philomene succumbs to yellow fever; when she awakens from her feverish stupor, she is told that her girls are gone—taken by the same disease. Narcisse Fredieu shows her the single grave, and Philomene does not challenge his word. She accepts that Bet and Thany are gone to her even though her glimpsing only saw Clement and Thany lost. (Thirty years later, Narcisse Fredieu would admit to her that Bet survived.) Narcisse renders Philomene more vulnerable by telling her that her children are dead. Before Philomene could grieve properly, Narcisse Fredieu staks his claim on her. She reflects: “This was the face of slavery. To have nothing, and still have something more to lose” (211). Philomene, though medically recovered from yellow fever, still suffers from the malady of heartbreak, a condition Tademy intentionally juxtaposes with yellow fever by conflating the initial symptoms of yellow fever—headache, nausea, fatigue, weakness—with the diseased imagery of Philomene’s state of heartbreak: “Wherever she went she could smell the stale breath of bitterness prodding her... Loneliness had become an ugly, open sore that festered instead of healing over” (210). Philomene—and by extension Cane River—is besieged by diseases that take loved ones away. In this respect, Tademy suggests that the institution of slavery is as deadly and inhumane as the virus that rampaged throughout Louisiana in the 1850s. Narcisse preys upon Philomene’s illness and demands that she “shake this off” and “get beyond the last few months” (211). He tells her, “I plan to have you, Philomene” (213). Narcisse insists that she can replace her lost children with new children by him. Implicit in his statement is his assumption that these new and whiter children will be more valuable; additionally, he presumes that surrendering to him will restore her mental and emotional health.

While in a semi-catatonic state, Philomene hears Suzette coaxing her back to life. However, Suzette’s narrative is framed by her own loss: “At least you know what it is to want a man, and have him want you back. That’s something I never tasted, the choosing of it, the pleasure of it,” ... ‘Your grandmother Elisabeth and grandfather Gerasime were like that’” (203). Although Suzette initially disapproved of Philomene’s relationship with Clement, she now reads their union in light of her own mother and father’s marriage. She tells her daughter to be grateful for the experience, however brief. In this moment, Suzette connects with Philomene’s pain and lays her own pain alongside it. However, Philomene does not respond, and Suzette leans back on a Christian aphorism: “It must have been their time, and they went on to a better place” (203). Philomene, awake and desperate to make sense of this meaningless suffering, goes to visit her grandmother Elisabeth. With her granddaughter sitting between her knees,
Elisabeth begins “to use her fingers to unmat Philomene’s hair” (215). As the grandmother untangles the mess of hair, Philomene begins to untangle the emotions that have kept her silent. “Mémère,” escapes her throat, and Elisabeth replies, “You’ve come back to us” (215). Philomene breaks her silence and reclaims her life. While the web of her circumstances ensnares her, she is no longer trapped inside her grief. This scene is significant because it is the mythic Elisabeth, not Suzette, who has the power to coax Philomene back into life. Elisabeth’s healing touch stimulates and strengthens Philomene’s will; moreover, through the ritual of hair combing Elisabeth initiates Philomene’s return into the fold of black womanhood. Echoes of Harriet Jacobs’ slave narrative resound in the storyline of Philomene; like Jacobs, Philomene manipulates her pursuer Narcisse Fredieu to support the children she has born him. She professes to Narcisse: “For you, there is only one way to have children, and that is through me” (297). Philomene attempts to procure protection and financial stability for her children through her inequitable relationship with the elder Narcisse. When Elisabeth warns her not to assume that she can win Narcisse’s heart, Philomene shoots back coldly, “What am I to do with a white man’s heart?... I want his head, his mind. I am not helpless, Mémère. I can watch people, too, look into their souls, know them. He wants me to know him, but he will never know me” (217). Emily Fredieu is a symbol of the covenant between Narcisse and Philomene. At the end of the Civil War, when freedom time has come for all, Philomene explains to Madame Oreline that she “won’t let freedom for Emily and me go to seed for lack of nurturing” (265). Philomene refuses to remain with Oreline as a servant; she must establish her own space and provide new opportunities for Emily to escape the burden of race. The shrewd Philomene makes a calculated choice to stay with Narcisse Fredieu after his return to Cane River following the Civil War. She chooses to stay because an alliance with Narcisse provides protection; Narcisse can act as an intercessor or an advocate for her family. In an effort to tie him to her and to secure his protection for her family, Philomene continues to weave glimpsings for Narcisse until about 1880 when she and Narcisse reach an impasse in their relationship. Dismayed by his lack of a legitimate male heir and pressured by changing societal attitudes regarding race-mixing, Narcisse dismisses Philomene’s fifteen years of glimpsings as superstitions and abandons Philomene and his black children. When the thread of her narrative is broken, Philomene loses her hold on Narcisse. The web she once wove to protect her family falls apart as Narcisse devotes his full attention to his white family and the legitimate white male heir he produces with his new wife.
Emily and the Transition from Blackness to Whiteness

Born in 1861, Emily represents a possibility for the salvation of the family. With her rests redemption and vindication; she is quality and will raise the family up from its prostration. Emily enjoys favor and protection because she is the daughter of Narcisse Fredieu and the mistress of Joseph Billes. These men value her, and, as a result, she is treated as a lady. Emily is educated and dressed in the finest clothes befitting her status as the daughter of a prominent white man. Her relationship with Joseph Billes is unlike Suzette’s and Philomene’s relationships with white men; Emily is not coerced into a union with the Frenchman Joseph Billes. She has other options. However, Emily, with whom Elisabeth, Suzette, and Philomene never talk about slavery, is disconnected from her mothers’ experiences with white men. She fully believes that, in this post-bellum era, she will be able to have a personal and public life with Joseph. Although Emily’s romance with Joseph signifies a departure from the rape and coercion Suzette and Philomene experience at the hands of white men, Emily’s relationship is doomed because, after the end of slavery, relationships like this one, once casually accepted, are challenged by communities and outlawed by legislatures. In 1900, Joseph acquiesces to the pressure from the community that he abandon Emily and take a white wife; Emily is unprepared to handle what comes next. Joseph has Emily physically removed from their home at Billes Landing to another home on Cornfine Bayou. Humiliated and heart-broken, Emily confines herself to bed; the mothers intervene and remind her “there is one thing you must never forget. You do not come from fragile stock” (413). Emily now belongs to them; she is linked to their suffering. Like her mothers before her, Emily shifts her focus squarely to the welfare of her children. She lobbies Joseph to provide for his children and implores him to leave property for them in his will. He does. However, this inheritance and the legitimacy of his children become a source of contention for Joseph and the white community and, perhaps, contribute to his subsequent murder in 1907. The murder of Joseph Billes and the government’s systematic denial of her children’s right to their inheritance undermine Emily’s and the family’s progress toward respectability and privilege.Emily’s perceivable

8. Michelle Brattain’s article, “Miscegenation and Competing Definitions of Race in Twentieth-Century Louisiana,” states, “In 1825, for example, the legislature revised the civil code to outlaw the legitimization of biracial children by white fathers, prohibit children of color from claiming paternity from white fathers, and make it more difficult for biracial children to receive and inheritance by
whiteness does not preclude her from unspeakable loss and suffering; whiteness, she recognizes, is not measured only by the color of one’s skin. Michelle Brattain notes in her article “Miscegenation and Competing Definitions of Race in Twentieth-Century Louisiana” that “observation often proved less important than knowledge of official records in establishing legal racial identity.”9 Despite biological kinship to whites, Emily and her children were not and could not pass for white because they had no documents declaring their status as legitimate whites. Besides, people in the community knew that Emily’s grandmother Suzette was a negress. Although her milky skin and thin narrow features look unlike those of the old brown woman Elisabeth and Suzette, Emily inherits the insight of the spider-web trope; its strategy for survival is the true gift bequeathed to Emily—not the whiteness of her appearance.

Through the visage of Emily, Tademy acknowledges the complexities of racial identity and allows her readers to suspend their judgment of those who were critical of or rejected fully their African American identities. Tademy, herself, must learn to embrace her great-grandmother Emily just as she embraces Elisabeth, Suzette, and Philomene. Her initial depictions of Emily are harsh and unflattering. For example, we hear Emily admitting to Bet that she had been ashamed of the deceased Elisabeth’s “dark skin and nappy hair and broken speech” (374). Emily, generations removed from the darkness of her lineage, justifies her embarrassment by explaining that her looks have provided her with advantages. The critical and judgmental tone of this scene is indicative of Tademy’s treatment of Emily elsewhere in the novel. Emily is selfish and unfeeling, presumably because she is more white than she is black.

However, in chapter forty-seven, while Emily is traveling alone on a bus to Colfax, we, the readers, witness how alone Emily is in a 1936 world that seems to be changing at warp speed. Emily’s presence is almost anachronistic. She attempts to speak, but no one on the bus speaks French. Tademy leads us to believe momentarily that the Louisiana of yesteryear is quickly fading into the horizon; she then erodes this imagery by locating Emily in the foreground of the day’s discrimination: Non-whites are expected to sit in the back of the bus; a man the color of strong coffee goes to the back door of a business; a white woman is served before Emily in the convenience store. Emily leaves the store without the shoes, tins of Red Rooster snuff, and peppermint sticks she planned to purchase; she re-boards the bus and intentionally sits in the front. It is not clear whether disallowing all but formal legal acknowledgement as a basis for establishing paternity.” The Journal of Southern History, 71 no. 3 (August 2005): 630.
9. Ibid., 644.
Emily sits in the front passing as a white woman or whether she is consciously daring the driver to question her right to sit in the front. Either way, her defiance is not risky because no one recognizes her blackness. Perhaps, she is, like Suzette, pissing in the rosebushes. But it is through these mundane acts, Tademy connects Emily Fredieu to her foremothers. Here, in chapter forty-eight, the final chapter of the novel, Tademy recognizes the links between Emily and her predecessors. She sees evidence of Elisabeth in Emily’s will to survive with dignity. She sees that it is struggle and love—not complexion—that binds these women together through the space of time. Emily’s story, thus, is validated through the stories of her mothers. Tademy can now reconcile herself with the legend of Emily passed down to her, and she ends the Emily section with a final act of resistance:

I’ll never be hungry enough to go to anyone’s back door, Emily thought. When the northbound bus finally came, emitting its noxious fumes as it slowed to a halt, Emily was the only passenger to get on. She shook off the dust of Colfax, raised her chin slightly, dropped her nickels into the driver’s waiting palm, and walked deliberately to the front seat, composing herself for the ride home. (517)

While Tademy depicts Emily more favorably at the end of the novel, she neither excuses nor justifies any of Emily’s ambivalence over color and race. Instead, Tademy locates Emily’s story within the broader context of Louisiana history:—Emily is a product of an environment that simultaneously thrives on and resents its own hybridity.

**Mothering and Motherhood**

In *Cane River*, mothers use their bodies to secure the futures of their children, they sacrifice their personal freedoms to ensure the birthrights of their offspring, and they nurse away the miseries of slavery, rape, and death. However, they are also silent, absent, or remain unmoved during times of crisis. They are not always the nurturers: sometimes they are the nurtured. They are jealous. They are obstacles in the way of dreams. Tademy does not idealize or romanticize mothering; instead, she humanizes the roles of her foremothers by revealing their flaws and fallibilities. These mothers instruct their daughters on how to survive in a hostile world—a world in which horrible acts are exacted upon the bodies and psyches of their daughters. As Richard Follett notes in “‘Lives of Living Death’: The Reproductive Lives of Slave Women in the Cane World of Louisiana,”
By consciously avoiding pregnancy or through gynecological resistance, black women reclaimed their own bodies, frustrated the planters’ pro-natalist policies, an in turn defied white male constructions of their sexuality. Whether swallowing abortifacients such as calomel and turpentine or chewing on natural contraceptives like cotton roots or okra, slave women wove contraception and miscarriages through the dark fabric of slave oppositional culture.10

Although the mothers in Cane River give birth to their children, they are not unlike those mothers who end their pregnancies. Tademy’s foremothers take drastic measures to reclaim their bodies and to provide for the well-being of their progeny. These women, like many others, survived—not whole, not necessarily in tact; yet, they managed to use their limited resources and their belief in family to triumph in the face of meaningless suffering. Like Harriet Jacobs, whose slave narrative recounts her decisions to take a white lover and to save herself and her family by hiding in the “loophole of [her] retreat,” Tademy’s ancestral matriarchs employ numerous strategies of mothering in an effort to rescue their families, especially their girls, from the intricate webs of race, class, and gender embedded in Louisiana Creole culture of the 1800s.11

Hazel Carby argues in Reconstructing Womanhood that the primary difference between white and black women under slavery derived from the fact that “[black women’s] reproductive destiny was bound to capital accumulation; black women gave birth to property and, directly, to capital itself in the form of slaves.”12 This experience shapes the ways in which these mothers mother and informs their ideas of motherhood. For example, Suzette’s dedication to her children fathered by Daurat is mired by her fears that they will be taken from her; she knows that Elisabeth was separated from her babies in Virginia. Her kind of devotion is dangerous. Nevertheless, Suzette’s devotion to her children’s well-being also sustains her; they are her motivation and purpose. Her dreams of love with the freeborn Nicolas, of a cultured existence, and of a virtuous or “quality” reputation have died. Still she sees her children as her chance for redemption; as such, she will risk everything to secure their future. When Françoise Derbanne, widow of Rosedew plantation owner Louis

Derbanne, dies, Suzette and the other slaves are thrust into additional peril. The death of owners mandated a redistribution of property; for the slaves, death meant that they might be separated from family forever. Suzette recalls Elisabeth’s constant message to her: “You do whatever you can, whatever you have to, in order to protect you and yours” (94). Philomene, a child then, is the most vulnerable: “Her little Philomene with her thick wavy hair and creamy skin, who did not know how to bend enough, yet. Whose expectations were even higher than Suzette’s own at that age. She needed more time with Philomene to get her ready” (95). Suzette, following in the tradition of Elisabeth, must prepare Philomene for her life as a slave woman. She must simultaneously teach her to acquiesce and to resist. She must teach her her place and encourage her to aspire beyond her lot in life. Tademy explores extensively this conundrum, for it is this paradox that defines the relationships of mothers and daughters in her family.

Despite her devotion, Suzette displays little emotional affection for Philomene or for her Gerant. Instead, she is focused on providing opportunities and keeping them safe while Elisabeth assumes the responsibility of nurturing her granddaughter’s spirit: “You find all the happiness you can with Clement, Philomene, and you bring us children when the time comes. Family stays family no matter where they are or who they are” (107-108). Elisabeth encourages Philomene to pursue a life with Clement despite the fact that Suzette is critical of such a union. Suzette, who once dreamed of loving Nicolas, a free colored boy, now discredits Philomene’s visions of love and future happiness. The heart-broken Suzette suggests that romantic love is impractical and perhaps even dangerous for slaves. Instead, she wants Philomene to take advantage of her light color and to position herself to do better. Suzette, once an idealist, is now a pragmatic matriarch who views this union as a lost opportunity to gain some semblance of power or control over their destinies. Despite her vocal objections, Suzette celebrates Philomene’s wedding day: “‘You’re mine all right,’ Suzette said, staring at the telltale gap between their front teeth that made it easy to spot the connection between these generations of women. ‘But you have it in you to do better, for yourself and the child you carry’” (156). Like Elisabeth, Suzette warns her daughter of the impending perils and then steps aside; Suzette has done all that she can to prepare Philomene for life.

Ultimately, it is the distant and practical Suzette who orchestrates moves that keep her family members near Cane River. She is the one who longs for the “everyday scent of her own mother, the easy knowledge that her family was within her reach” (124). She instills familial values in her
daughter: “Family is everything, Philomene. Do not ever forget that. A tree without roots cannot survive” (125). Here Suzette speaks with the mother wit of Elisabeth. She encapsulates profound and immense information of survival in the metaphor of a rootless tree and renders that knowledge transportable. Philomene can take that maxim with her wherever her fate may take her. Suzette keeps “Elisabeth’s words in the front of her mind” and sacrifices everything for her family (94). Suzette endures the loss of her first love Nicolas, her subjugation to Eugene Daurat, and the death of her sister Palmire. She is the caretaker, the nurturer who supplies the needs of her family.

The seemingly aloof relationship between Philomene and Suzette is not without affection; however, Suzette understands that protection from harm takes precedence over outward signs of endearment. Affection for Suzette means assuming responsibility for the needs of her children; she must equip them with a consciousness necessary for survival in their world. Writing about the slave narrative of Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent), Paula Giddings observes: “For a slave like Linda Brent to have developed such a consciousness, it was necessary for some authority figure to have given her a sense of self that contradicted the dictates of the new slavery. In her case it was a grandmother, for as Brent wrote, her hatred of her master stemmed from his attempt to destroy the values her grandmother has ‘inculcated’ in her.”13 Like Jacob’s grandmother, Suzette’s goal, then, is to give Philomene and her son Gerant a sense of self not defined by slavery. Although Suzette is powerless to protect her daughter from Narcisse, she, nevertheless, charges Philomene with the responsibility of making a way out of no way, with navigating the strands of her web. Naomi Morgenstern’s “Mother’s Milk and Sister’s Blood: Trauma and the Neoslave Narrative” summarizes Gayl Jones’ Corregidora, concluding that “Moreover, the story of slavery in general, insofar as it is a story of captivity, torture, and sexual violence, is also a traumatized, gothic narrative.”14 Suzette especially, but, essentially, all of these women are traumatized, and their relationships to one another are colored by this trauma.

Locating Cane River in the African American Literary Tradition

Readers of Tademy’s account, recognize Elisabeth as a familiar “type” of African American mother. She reminds us of Granny Ticey in Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966), Mama Day in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988), Baby Suggs in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), and even Sweetie Reed in Leon Forrest’s *Two Wings to Veil My Face* (1983). Elisabeth is the strong motherlode figure who holds the family and the community together; she is the model upon which we base—historically—our own notions of African American motherhood. However, Tademy reminds us throughout the novel of Elisabeth’s shortcomings and failures: Elisabeth is no idealized matriarchal figure. Instead, Elisabeth is both heroic and tragic; she rescues and fails her children. She has a mother wit and a way with words that cuts her children to the quick. Elisabeth is the one who reminds her daughter Suzette: “You come on out of your head and see how things really are. Any of us could be sold tomorrow” and “Reaching too deep into something not meant for you is full of pain” (24-25). She protects her children by limiting their expectations. She dashes their hopes, especially Suzette’s hopes, because she has seen slavery at its harshest. Shirley A. Hill asserts,

Tademy’s focus on the family decision-making of her female ancestors stands in sharp contrast to male-centered revisionist accounts of enslaved families clinging to the patriarchal traditions of pre-colonial Africa or doing their best to imitate White marriage patterns. She highlights the saliency of female bonds and the agency of Black women forming families, and her work resonates with recent research showing that slavery produced a diversity of Black families because it evolved differently based on regional and economic factors.15

Tademy’s matrifocal narrative contributes to the growing body of feminist scholarship assessing gendered experiences with slavery. Often these experiences have been articulated through a male vision of bondage and characterized as a story of individual struggle and triumph. Unlike Frederick Douglass’ narratives, for instance, *Cane River* is not predicated on the heroism of an individual; instead, the novel emphasizes the importance of family and community to surviving slavery and oppression.

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In this vein, *Cane River* can be read as a part of a larger narrative of African American women’s writing. Whether the character is fictional such as Sherley Anne Williams’ Dessa Rose or the autobiographical persona of Julia A. J. Foote, the protagonists in African American women’s writing refute, dispel, challenge, and dismiss ascribed definitions of black womanhood and motherhood. Tademy’s text is relevant because it reaffirms this African American pattern of (s)heroism. The women suffer, endure, and triumph. They resist. They protest. They are not passive victims resigned to fate. From Harriet Jacobs’ *Narrative* (1862) to Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966) and from Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Maud Martha* (1953) to Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1998), African American women’s writing documents the horror of slavery and oppression, but more importantly it shows how women make a way out of no way.

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