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*Scout's Daughters:
Race and Creative Development in Contemporary Adolescent Literature*

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A Chronological Continuum

At the heart of what Roberta S. Trites titles “adolescent literature” – works written both for and about young adults—is a question of agency (*Disturbing* 7). In *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, Trites asserts that adolescent novels attempt to answer the question of young adults who wonder if they “should or even can affect the world in which they live” (1). Trites’ argument is based on the idea that the distinguishing characteristic of adolescent literature is its focus on “the social forces” that shape, and often limit, young adults (3). In order for real-world and literary pre-teens to learn about their agency they must constantly challenge the “power” that pervades their life in the form of socially constructed ideologies (3-5). My thesis is an application of this theory as it applies to four novels: Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Kaye Gibbons’ *Ellen Foster* (1987), Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees* (2001), and Pam Muñoz Ryan’s *Becoming Naomi León* (2005). As “novels of growth and development,” these works are categorized as “*Entwicklungsroman*” (7-9). These novels are not considered bildungsroman, which would imply the protagonist has “reached adulthood by the end of the narrative” (9-10). This difference is crucial, as it allows for a focus on the immediate, rather than long-term, results of challenging social forces. The shortened narrative time span of these novels gives the protagonist an opportunity to discern the impact of her actions – either affirming or undermining her agency.

Trites begins *Disturbing the Universe* with an analysis of *The Chocolate War*, a novel she considers one of the first pieces of adolescent literature. Yet, Jerry Renault (the main character of *The Chocolate War*) has one major advantage over the protagonists in the novels I will be discussing, his gender. Gender, like race, ethnicity, or religion, is among the many “political constructs” that are used to repress and define identity (Trites, *Disturbing*, 46). In order to

successfully recover her agency, an adolescent protagonist must rebel against such constructs. The novelists addressed in this thesis present the repressive construct of gender to their protagonists from the onset of each book. As females, Scout, Ellen, Lily, and Naomi (the four protagonists of the novels respectively) must struggle to become “empowered regardless of gender” (Trites, *Waking*, 4). Trite argues that the most compelling way to revise gender roles is to depict a protagonist with agency (5). It is only once each protagonist successfully overcomes the challenge presented by her gender that the novel is capable of sending a positive and encouraging message to young female readers.

However, the struggles of these four characters are not simply against traditional gender roles. These works link together because they share a more specific motif, the question of race. As Trites points out, race, like gender, is also a “political construct,” both created with repression of their respective groups in mind (Trites, *Disturbing*, 46). Ultimately, the protagonist of the novel must challenge the racial constructs of her societies in order to become an empowered female. I begin my trajectory of novels with *To Kill a Mockingbird*, because it was written at a time when the socially constructed institution of race had a profound impact on the structuring of society. Of course, race and racism had played a role in American society long before Lee’s novel was published in 1960. Yet, the emergence of a strong Civil Rights movement at this time began a trend in American adolescent literature which focused on the question of race as a vehicle to explore maturation. I include the other three novels, although written at various times over nearly half a century, because I believe that the progression of history allows each more recent author to reexamine this central question. As each novelist revises her protagonist’s interactions with race, she is able to depict a female character with increasing agency. If “transcend[ing]” repressive racial systems bolsters the “protagonist’s agency,” then the more

successful each protagonist's interactions with race are, the more likely she is to develop a sense of agency (Trites, *Waking*, 6-7).

Challenging the institutions of both gender and race provides the protagonists with more opportunities to shape their own identities. However, the latter three novels – *Ellen Foster*, *The Secret Life of Bees*, and *Becoming Naomi León* – also include the motif of creative development as a metaphor for increasing agency (Trites, *Waking*, 5). An imperative part of challenging social norms (such as gender and race) is developing a voice, both literally and figuratively. Essentially, agency and creative expression share a symbiotic relationship. Trites focuses on the development of a female voice by discussing the genre of *kunstlerromans*, or the “novel of artistic development” (63). In each of these three later works, art forces the young female characters to explore their agency. Yet, in order to create a feminist *kunstlerroman*, the protagonist's primary identity must *depend* on her creative expression. Creative development in these works not only motivates the search for identity, it also becomes a way to talk about the question of race within each work. The varying levels of creative expression in each work reveal the limitations of interracial interaction and reflect the protagonist's connection to race, while gauging each girl's ability to develop by the end of her story. Creativity provides Ellen, Lily, and Naomi with tools to understand and interact with race. Their success in doing so is mirrored by their level of creative ability.

It is only clear how the later three texts increase racial interactions and explore creative expression when these three novels are viewed alongside *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As one of the most famous novels that uses race to explore female development, Lee's work serves as a sort of archetypal model for Gibbons, Kidd, and Ryan. In order to understand how these later three texts both reflect on and revise the role race plays in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we must consider

how this classic novel functions as an early canonical representation of female development. Since its publication in 1960, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been celebrated as an American classic. The novel is renowned for the way it captures the issue of "race and racial oppression" through the eyes of young Scout (Lubet 18). Yet, its primary focus seems to be what critic Kathryn Lee Seidel has called "the problem of growing up female" (80). Essentially, Lee's novel employs the issue of race to help structure and define Scout's maturation, as learning about racism and race – primarily through Tom Robinson's trial— becomes the catalyst for Scout's development. According to the Trites, developing agency requires extensive challenging of social structures (such as race). While Scout is undeniably affected by the racial tensions unfolding in her community, does she really actively challenge social norms?

Most critics agree that Scout undermines traditional feminine expectations throughout the course of the novel. Critic Laura Fine confirms this idea when she states Scout "breaks traditional social boundaries by playing and living like a conventional boy rather than a girl" (66). A rejection of Aunt Alexandra's life as a "supremely conventional southern lady" and a desire to "wear overalls" while being "active and athletic," suggest that Scout is not a typical 1960s girl (66, 65). Similarly, Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin's article, "Humor and Humanity in *To Kill a Mockingbird*," contests Scout's femininity by highlighting her desire to belong to "the world of her brother" (51). Critic Seidel explains that a crucial part of Scout's maturation is her "early rejection" of such gender roles (80). Steven Lubet's argument that the novel is "Scout's 'love story' to her father" only reinforces the narrator's admiration of masculinity (22). Although limited by the 1930s setting of the novel and the 1960s in which Lee wrote, Scout is able to challenge her femininity during her maturation process.

While Scout successfully defies the social construct of gender, her growth seems stunted in terms of her interactions with race. Fine depicts a strong-minded Scout when it comes to gender, but she paints a sponge-like image of Scout when it concerns race. She claims, “Scout absorbs, and learns from, everything that happens around her” (76). The use of the words “absorbs” and “around her” suggests that Scout is merely an observational narrator removed from the trajectory of events in the novel. Jennifer Murray’s article, “More than One Way to (Mis)Read a *Mockingbird*,” takes this analysis a step further by combining the questions of gender and race. Murray insists that the “androgynous” and tomboyish nature of Scout makes her a passive other and weakens her role as the main character of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (7). Murray claims Scout is just an “observer” in the novel, simply “transformed” by her surrounding events (7). While I would argue this passive role does not detract from Scout’s position as the novel’s main character, Scout’s lack of agency – a crucial part of development – limits her ability to interact with people of other races. Aside from deciding to sit in the “colored” section of the courthouse and asking to go to church with her black housekeeper, Scout does not proactively interact with members of the opposite race at the same levels as her literary heirs (who live in the late 80s and beyond). Even at the climax of the novel, Scout – dressed up in a confining and bulky ham costume – remains removed from the immediate action that injures her brother. This moment seems to characterize perfectly Scout’s buffer from the realities of race. Unlike the protagonists of more modern books, Scout remains constantly “safe” from the potentially dangerous results of racial interaction.

Of course, the historical context of *To Kill a Mockingbird* limits the extent to which we can criticize Scout. When the novel was first published, reviews celebrated its ability to address the “subject of injustice of the south” in its accurate portrayal of racism and race relations

(Mitgang). Interestingly, the novel's contemporary reviews seem to suggest the 1960s audience also understood the limitations of Scout's racial interactions. A reviewer for the *New York Times* claims the novel depicts a series of "episodes that mold Scout's character" (Lyell). Another views the novel as "a charming tale of the emergence of two youngsters from the realm of wild childhood fantasy to the horizon of maturity...and social insight" (Hunter). Both of these reviews hint at Scout's impressionable nature and lack of self-developed agency. It is possible that contemporary audiences were not ready for the intensified racial interactions that seem to be a crucial step towards acquiring agency. Modern readers may contest that the growth mentioned in these 1960s reviews is the ultimate point of adolescent literature, and so the level of racial interaction is irrelevant. However, true adolescent growth cannot be experienced without "gradations between power and powerlessness," making the question of power the "fundamental" aspect of adolescent literature (Trites, *Disturbing*, x). Nonetheless, these reviews seem to suggest an awareness of Scout's inactive role in the novel.

The same reviewer who applauded *To Kill a Mockingbird's* message, also asserted that Lee's work reinforces the "novel as a form that transcends time and place" (Mitgang). This claim may have applied to the readers of the 60s, but is this novel enough for a modern audience? As American society evolves, it seems that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is bound by both time *and* place. Of course, *To Kill a Mockingbird* will always be celebrated as an American classic, but if we want protagonists with agency who speak to today's readers we cannot stop with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I believe that since the publication of Lee's work, novelists writing female adolescent literature have already begun the search for this more empowered protagonist. Gibbons, Kidd, and Ryan have built upon their predecessors, and in doing so have moved towards constructing this ideal protagonist. Thus, this series of novels represents the assembling

of a female protagonist who is “aware of her own agency,” able to “assert her own personality and to enact her own decisions” (Trites, *Waking*, 5). In this thesis, I will explore how successful each succeeding work is at depicting a female protagonist able to challenge racial and ethnic structures in a search for agency. As a metaphor for this journey, art gauges the depth of each girl’s racial interactions.

Female Protagonists & Maternal Trauma

Aside from gender and race, these four novels are also linked by an essential character, the motherless protagonist. In *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children’s Novels*, Trites claims the maternal bond is the “primary relationship,” because the mother helps young females navigate their way through the maturation process (100). In *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Nancy Chodorow claims “The infant experiences the primary sociality in our society in relation to its mother” (63). Since the mother functions in society as one of the only—and certainly one of the most important—symbols of female maturity, a mother-daughter relationship, or lack thereof, can greatly affect a young girl’s development. As motherless girls, Scout, Ellen, Lily, and Naomi must explore and challenge the limitations of their gender on their own. By removing the maternal character from their novels, these four authors present their protagonist with an opportunity to explore her agency in a more introspective and self-guided manner, as she is seemingly uninhibited by maternal guidance.

Despite being motherless, Scout does not experience this opportunity, as she has a strong paternal figure that facilitates her learning. Atticus’ influence on Scout is so strong Scout even claims she “never felt her [mother’s] absence” (Lee 6). Critic Tavernier-Courbin confirms Scout’s structured and dependable life by explaining that the children “have a happy family life

with their remarkable father, Atticus” (42). These two quotations suggest that the pain of maternal loss can be lessened by a strong paternal figure. Because Scout has a strong and loving relationship with her father, she is unable to challenge completely the gendered structure of her society. Thus, her rebellion against such structures does not extend far beyond her tomboyish ways. In the three more modern works, each author prevents this immediate overcompensation by depicting abusive or absent fathers. In the case of Ellen and Lily, an abusive household renders them basically parentless. Naomi, whose mother abandoned her at the age of four, is physically isolated from her father who lives in Mexico. It is important that these three characters are not orphaned, as that would allow for a completely new set of parents. Instead, the inadequacy of their surviving parents motivates them to search actively for a new home, thus beginning their search for agency.

The situation that leads to the maternal loss and the resulting failure of the father sets the stage for each girl’s interaction with race. Ellen’s ability to associate her mother’s suicide with her father’s abuse allows her to sympathize with her mother and distance herself from her father. After returning home from the hospital and facing her husband’s abuse, Ellen’s mother swallows a container of heart medicine and commits suicide (Gibbons 8-9). Even though the death of Ellen’s mother was her mother’s own choice, Ellen is still riddled with guilt.¹ Perhaps Ellen is traumatized because she was painfully aware of her mother’s suffering at the hands of her father—“Even my mama’s skin looked tired of holding in her weak self” (2). Shortly after her mother dies, Ellen describes her father as “Guilty and held down in his chair by God,” acknowledging his role in her mother’s death (10). Ellen’s father’s abusive nature is an important part of her ability to move forward instead of dwelling on the past. She is able to

¹ In her article “Stories Told by Their Survivors (and Others Sins of Memory): Survivor Guilt in Kaye Gibbon’s *Ellen Foster*,” Linda Watts examines Ellen’s “awareness of mortality and her experiences of survivor guilt” (223).

detach herself from her home because her mother has died and her father is abusive. Yet, the fact that he is basically absent from her story (Ellen tells the reader “My daddy showed up at the house less and less”), reinforces his inadequacy as a parent (36). Ellen’s story portrays the paternal character as the evil enemy, allowing her to detach from her father figure in preparation for her impending search for a new home.²

Similarly to Ellen’s experience, Lily must face the death of her mother and the abuse of her father. However, one important element – Lily’s guilt – gives her an added challenge to overcome. At the age of four, Lily accidentally fired a gun that killed her mother. Her guilt is reinforced by her abusive father, who does everything in his power to remind her that she was the one who “took her [mother] away” (Kidd 8). Lily seems to experience moments such as those characterized by Cathy Caruth who explains, “one feels anger, guilt, or shame whenever one is unable (refuses) to accept the necessity and unavoidability of what happened...as the memories are restored...pain is experienced” (87). And in fact, when Lily does allow herself to feel that she “had caused [her mother’s death]...[the knowledge] would overwhelm” her (Kidd 17). The reader gets a sense of the enormity of such an emotional weight at the very beginning of the story. Lily explains that if she met her mother in heaven she would “meet her saying, ‘Mother, forgive. Please forgive,’” and that for the “first ten thousand years” her mother would remind Lily that she “was not to blame” (3). The desires of Lily, to receive forgiveness from her mother and to be constantly reassured of her innocence, expose the depth of her sense of guilt and responsibility. Lily’s source of pain is so great she often contemplates the sweet nature of death over a hard life—“people who think dying is the worst thing don’t know a thing about life” (2). The beginning of the novel successfully portrays a protagonist who lives with an

² Critic Giavanna Munafo claims the “astonishing first line [of the novel] – ‘When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy’ – bludgeons the daddy’s-little-girl prototype so dear to portraits of idealized families” (38-39).

overwhelming sense of guilt and lack of love. Lily's desire to overcome her guilt motivates her to leave home, as she literally searches for her mother's past and subconsciously searches for parental love.

Both Lily and Ellen are technically not orphaned, yet their stories portray two girls whose lives lack familial love and care. Interestingly, it seems as if both Gibbons and Kidd must deprecate the paternal characters – the archetypal Atticus figures – in order to present a strong love for, or memory of, the maternal character. Ellen's alcoholic father might not “hurt [Ellen's mother] with his hands,” but his violent behavior forces Ellen to become a sort of watchdog for her mother (Gibbons 8). Ellen's “evil” father often threatens to kill Ellen and her mother (9). After her mother's death, Ellen's father becomes completely neglectful –sometimes not returning home for days—and eventually sexually abuses Ellen (36-38). Lily defines living with her father, T. Ray, as a “special misery,” as he is physically, emotionally, and mentally abusive (Kidd 3). After his wife's death, T. Ray continues to abuse Lily physically – forcing her to kneel on grits for hours after playing in the peach orchards (24-25). However, his worst abuse seems to be emotional abuse, as he constantly reminds Lily that her mother “could have cared less” about her and that on the day she died she was preparing to leave them both – when in reality she planned on bringing Lily with her (39, 254). Even when he is not physically abusing her, T. Ray acts as if Lily is “not even in the room” at all times (22). While the abusive nature of each father is a key element of both girls' search for a stable and happy family, the abuse primarily displays the power of the patriarch – as his actions can even kill off the maternal character. The parental characters in these stories also force readers to consider the maternal role the only viable source of stable love and support. This theme will continue as each girl searches for a stand-in mother, and finds a predominantly female household.

Unlike Ellen and Lily, Naomi is abandoned by her mother and physically distanced from her father. While both *Ellen Foster* and *The Secret Life of Bees* open with the explanation of a death that makes maternal bonding impossible, Naomi's story opens with the return of her mother after seven years. While this reunion is a source of hope for Naomi, it also reminds her that her mother's absence in her life was a conscious choice (more so than either Ellen's or Lily's mothers). This return reminds Naomi of the trauma her mother caused her by abandoning her two different times. The first time, her mother went on a shopping trip during a natural disaster, leaving four-year-old Naomi to "baby-sit" herself and her one-year-old brother (Ryan 42). The second abandonment occurs only a few weeks later, when their mother, Terri-Lynn, dropped the children off at her grandmother's trailer (42). Seven years later, Gram explains to Terri-Lynn that this series of events traumatized Naomi so badly she "didn't even talk until she was almost six" (23). When Naomi's mother first arrives at Gram's home, neither of the children recognizes their mother, despite Terri-Lynn's insistence that "'Children always know their mother'" (19). Naomi realizes right away that even with this chance for reconnection – one neither Lily or Ellen is allowed – her mother does not "fit the pictures" in her mind "right off the mark" (40). While Lily and Ellen can idealize their maternal bonds because their mothers are dead, Naomi is unable to deny the failures of her mother to fill her maternal role. Since Naomi has not seen her father since she was a child, she does not experience paternal abuse as a motivation to leave home. Instead, Naomi's trip away from her home is motivated by a desire to separate herself from her mother. Naomi experiences the hardest struggle early on as her search towards agency begins with a rebellion against the most significant character in a young girl's life, the mother.

In *Becoming Naomi León*, the rebellion against the mother is achieved by a search for the paternal character. Unlike Ellen and Lily, Naomi has only good memories of her father. Her father, Santiago, is described as “‘a gentle, sweet man...[who] was smart and full of life’” (Ryan 28). The story of Naomi’s mother leaving her during a natural disaster is followed by a memory of her father coming to save them: “Owen and I were huddled in a room near the ocean...I cried and cried until our father rushed in. He swooped us up into his arms” and took them to safety (41). The fact that Naomi’s only memory of her father portrays him as a savior (when the mother did not provide safety) contrasts the failure of the maternal character alongside the loving paternal character, something not seen in the earlier novels. Potentially, the father’s abandonment could be viewed as a negative portrayal of male characters. However, the fact that it is the mother who “packed [the children] up, and took [them] back to Lemon Tree [Gram’s house]” shows that it was the actions of the mother that prevented the children from having a father figure in their lives (42). While she might not remember him well, Naomi continues to dream about her missing father, thinking she “would rather have [her] father” in her life than her mother (41). This novel offers young audiences a new depiction of the paternal character by displaying the mother as neglectful and the father as nurturing (41).

While none of the three characters has a constant maternal figure, there are other individuals in the novels who support the girls after their maternal loss. In *Disturbing the Universe*, Trites concludes that there are primarily three types of parents in literature about young adults. The main two types in these novels are the “*in parentis*” – a traditional genetically related parent—and “*in locos parentis*” – or a surrogate parent (Trites, *Disturbing*, 58-60). The role of a stand-in parent is arguably evident in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as the black housekeeper Calpurnia is often viewed as a “wise surrogate mother; a worthy counterpart to Atticus...[who]

offers the Finch children discipline, nurture, and love” (Blackall 23). However, in “More than One Way to (Mis)Read a *Mockingbird*,” Jennifer Murray convincingly argues that, while it may seem “progressive” to include Calpurnia in Scout’s life, in doing so, Lee actually “bows to racist ideology of the 1930s...[and] 1950s” (13). Calpurnia may have a “permanence” in the novel, but the fact that she has a family separate from the Finches, and that she is viewed primarily as a “faithful worker,” prevent her from functioning as a true substitute parent (11, 12). Calpurnia may be the clear female role-model in Scout’s life. However, the “system of values” portrayed in *To Kill a Mockingbird* leaves Scout without a positive and strong maternal proxy (13).

Much like Scout, Ellen also lacks a stand-in mother. However, Ellen is also missing a supportive set of “*in parentis*,” – as her father is uninterested and uninvolved in his daughter’s life —and so Ellen is left to fend for herself (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*, 58). The night of her mother’s funeral, Ellen’s father “stayed gone until the next night,” leaving Ellen home alone (Gibbons 23). Ellen becomes responsible for paying the bills and buying herself food with the money left in her mailbox by her uncle, as her father “stopped doing anything but drinking and sleeping” (25). The constant recurring image of Ellen buying herself food and celebrating Christmas alone, reminds the reader that she does not have a stand-in parent. Ellen’s lack of a stand-in parent leaves her open to the attacks of her father and his friends. One such scene occurs when Ellen’s house is “run over by colored men drinking whiskey and singing” (37). After the men tell Ellen’s father that she is “just about ripe,” Ellen’s father rapes her while she tries to hide in the closet (37-38). After this night, Ellen decides to leave her house and never come back; thus her search for a new mother begins (40). Ellen’s lack of a mother and need for a stand-in mother provide her with a very different motivation for leaving home than Lily.

Unlike Ellen, Lily's young age at the time of her mother's death necessitates maternal replacement. The immediate stand-in parent in Lily's story is one Trites describes as "*in locos parentis*," or a "surrogate" parent against which Lily can rebel (60). Lily's first "*in locos parentis*" is Rosaleen – who was "pulled out of the peach orchard, where she'd worked as one of [T. Ray's] pickers" shortly after Lily's mother died (Kidd 2). She is a hodgepodge of housekeeper, nanny, cook, and mother for Lily. Lily makes Rosaleen's role quite clear when she explains she "came everyday...[to] be my stand-in mother" (2). Although she may be a black servant, Rosaleen can maintain a more clearly maternal role because of the characters' mutual love and Rosaleen's focus on Lily (unlike Calpurnia, she has no other family). Lily first becomes aware of this love when Rosaleen defends her against T. Ray when Lily is eight years old – the sort of protection Ellen clearly lacks. After that, Lily claims she "was the only one who knew that despite [Rosaleen's] sharp ways, her heart was more tender than a flower skin and she loved me beyond reason" (11). Her connection to Rosaleen is reinforced after Lily thinks Rosaleen has left her. Lily "felt the same old grief [she'd] known in church every single Mother's Day. *Mother, forgive*" (54). The parallel between Lily's feelings towards her mother and Rosaleen confirms the significance and legitimacy of Rosaleen's role as a stand-in mother.

Naomi, however, has the most stable "*in locos parentis*," her great-grandmother Gram. Gram, who has raised Naomi and her brother Owen since they were toddlers, is the most similar to a maternal figure. The two live with only Gram, in Gram's home, and she fulfills the children's maternal and emotional needs. Gram makes many efforts to make the children feel like they are a natural family, even adding her last name, "Outlaw," to Owen and Naomi's names so they would "have a frame for a family" (Ryan 37). Naomi attests to the stability and supportiveness of this frame on the first page of the novel, when she claims their family unit is

“knitted together snug as a new mitten” (1). Naomi even tells Gram she “filled in real nice” after their mother left them (29). The fact that Naomi already has a constructed family at the beginning of the story means she does not need to find a new home – unlike Lily and Ellen who need to find a source of love and care. Naomi’s acceptance of her stand-in family is emphasized by her defensive nature when her mother returns home early in the novel. Although she is excited to get to know her mother, she is hesitant to accept her into the home she has built with Gram and Owen. Unlike the fragmented lifestyle of Ellen and Lily, Naomi’s story shows readers that there is a possibility for family stability even without the traditional mother and father.

Fragmenting the immediate family allows each of these four authors to explore the way family structures affect maturation. In an effort to allow their protagonists a freedom Scout lacked, Gibbons, Kidd, and Ryan employ different sorts of neglectful and absent parents. While *To Kill a Mockingbird* does not depict the harrowing aspects of maternal loss, each successive novel reveals the importance of the maternal character by portraying the suffering associated with the loss of one’s mother. The absence of a maternal figure and the fracturing of the immediate family structure, spark Ellen’s, Lily’s, and Naomi’s searches for healing. The search for a new family, or in Naomi’s case her father, is the vehicle that helps introduce race and ethnicity into each of the later three works. Scout, who does not feel the loss of a maternal character, has little reason to pursue interracial interactions outside of those in her hometown. However, Ellen, Lily, and Naomi –disturbed by the reworking of familial structures –actively mingle with members of another race (or in Naomi’s case, members of her own ethnic group) in search of healing. Thus, maternal trauma sets the stage for each protagonist’s racial interactions, and provides her with the opportunity to challenge the social construct of racial and ethnic identity in search of agency.

Exploring Racial Interactions and Identity

As seen in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a crucial part of each protagonist's search for maturity is her encounters with race and ethnicity. Yet, these later three novels depict increasingly more intimate relationships between the protagonists and race. In *Race Mixing: Southern Fiction Since the Sixties*, Suzanne Jones posits that "contemporary writers have found the child...invaluable in examining the impediments to better relationships between blacks and whites" (19). Jones' statement applies most directly to Ellen and Lily—two white individuals—who interact with members of the black community on their path towards finding a sense of healing and a home. Yet in recent years, writers have found it useful to discuss racial and ethnic identity as well as interaction. We have moved into what some would call a "post-racial" moment, when the color line is not the most important dividing line. Such is the case in *Becoming Naomi León*, as Naomi's interactions with race are not focused on a black-white relationship, but the rediscovery of her own Mexican ethnicity. On the surface, Naomi's Mexican background seems to be an "ethnicity," yet her physical identification with the group implies her heritage functions, in many ways, as a racial identity. While relations with members of racial and ethnic groups provide each girl with the chance to challenge social norms—and thus gain agency – there remain varying levels of successful communion within the three works. Ellen and Lily, whose "interracial intimacy" crosses racial lines, have much more difficult interactions than Naomi, who rediscovers her own mixed ethnicity (Jones, *Race Mixing*, 62).

Of all three protagonists, Ellen Foster has the most challenging time overcoming racist attitudes, as race in *Ellen Foster* is most often a force that divides. It is clear from early in the

novel that Ellen has been raised amongst white racist individuals who generally view black individuals as a threat to white society both figuratively and literally. While Ellen is not exempt from these preconceived notions, her relationship with her black best friend Starletta complicates Ellen's perception of race. In her article, "Between Girls: Kaye Gibbons' 'Ellen Foster' and Friendship as a Monologic Formulation," critic Sharon Monteith claims that Ellen and Starletta's relationship merely "illuminates the white girl's [Ellen's] progress towards adult understanding" by transforming Starletta into an "*object*" as she is "firmly fixed as auxiliary to Ellen" (47,60,47). The objectification of Starletta is highlighted by Ellen's first mention of Starletta at Ellen's mother's funeral; "I see Starletta and she looks clean...[but] Starletta and her mama both eat dirty...She sits and eats clay dirt and picks at her bug bites" (Gibbons 20). Ellen's surprise at Starletta's cleanliness and her disapproving comments about her eating habits are just one example of the way Ellen objectifies Starletta throughout the book. Yet, Ellen's simultaneous "wish" to "sit with her and her mama and daddy" at the funeral allows the reader to understand the affinity Ellen has for Starletta and her family (20). It is this love that allows Starletta's family to become a sort of second family for Ellen: calling when Ellen's heat gets shut off, buying Ellen a winter coat, taking her shopping, and inviting her over for Christmas (25-26). While these early interactions between Ellen and Starletta's family suggest that Ellen is capable of accepting racial differences to receive familial support, they also propagate the stereotype of the "black family...as a source of nurturance and care for the white child" (Munafa 54).

Despite Ellen's relationship with Starletta, ultimately "blackness" labels Starletta's family as "inappropriate" for white Ellen (Munafa 47).³ Yet, Ellen's judgmental tone – wondering why "they do not try to be white" and explaining that they might be clean but the

³ After finding out Ellen is being abused, workers at the school reject her request to live with Starletta (44).

house “is still dirty”—highlights what critic Giavanna Munafo calls “the racial exigency of concepts like ‘home’ and ‘family’” (Gibbons 29, 30; Munafo 39).⁴ While Ellen refers to physical filth – saying the house is dirty and demanding that Starletta “wash before [Ellen] will play with [her]”—her condescending attitude reminds the reader of a metaphorical dirtiness associated with African-American characters in the novel (Gibbons 31). Ellen’s refusal to drink and eat “in a colored house” is perhaps the most symbolic of her racist viewpoint, as food and drink are not only necessary to live, but also associated with hospitality (33). She refuses to stay for dinner and explains “no matter how good it looks to you it is still a colored biscuit” (31-32).⁵ While she might be “fond” of the family, she will not drink after them because “if something is small it is bound to get into your system and do some damage” (29-30). It seems as if Ellen thinks Starletta’s germs are intrinsically tied to her skin color. Ellen’s insistence that racial differences are somehow physically dangerous is reinforced when she stays at Starletta’s the night her father rapes her. In the morning, she is “surprised” to feel normal after spending the night in a black home, but reminds herself this must be because she “stayed in [her] coat on top of the covers and did not “officially” sleep in the bed (39). Ellen’s simultaneous dependence on Starletta’s family and inability to escape her prejudices complicates her construction of a home throughout the novel. This tension implies that, while Ellen acknowledges Starletta’s family as happy and loving, she still desires a white home.

While race limits Ellen and Starletta’s relationship, race in *The Secret Life of Bees* has the potential to threaten Lily and Rosaleen’s relationship. An important part of Lily’s ability to

⁴ Munafo’s article, “‘Colored Biscuits:’ Reconstruction of Whiteness and the Boundaries of ‘Home’ in Kay Gibbons’s *Ellen Foster*,” claims that Ellen’s development is defined by her “attempt to reconstruct her own whiteness” through interactions with blackness (40).

⁵ In her discussion of this scene (which inspired the title of her essay) Munafo highlights how Ellen intrinsically ties the domestic and home with whites by labeling the biscuit (a domestic object) “colored” (41). As Munafo claims Ellen’s “whiteness constitutes her one saving grace,” this scene begins to reveal the extent to which Ellen’s search for a home will be circumscribed by whiteness (39).

accept Rosaleen as her stand-in mother is seeing past the racial attitudes of their time. Lily is aware that Rosaleen's race means she can never pass as Lily's biological mother. However, their physical differences do not prevent Lily from having "daydreams in which [Rosaleen] was white and married T. Ray and became [her] real mother" (Kidd 12). This daydream implies that the bond between them can only be authenticated, and thus become "real," if Rosaleen is white (12). Another daydream of Lily's includes her becoming a "Negro orphan," so that she can be "adopted" by Rosaleen (12). Like the previous example, this one requires that Lily transcend the realities of her race in order to form an official link with Rosaleen. Lily imagines that only in a "foreign country like New York" could they have a "real" bond and both remain their "natural color" (12). At the beginning of the novel, Lily's definition of a true maternal figure requires impossible racial changes or relocations in order to avoid the racial implications of her bond with Rosaleen.

While the two undeniably love each other, their relationship is often fraught with racial tensions, as Lily unavoidably sees through the lens of a white girl in a racist South. After Lily breaks Rosaleen out of jail (for pouring snuff juice on white men's shoes), they embark on a quest to find South Carolina.⁶ This trip seems reminiscent of Huck and Jim's voyage, as the physical journey of both literary pairs mirrors a metaphorical navigation through the complex racial structures of their times. During a night spent by a river, Rosaleen accuses Lily of "act[ing] like you're my keeper. Like I'm some dumb nigger you gonna save" (Kidd 53). Lily responds by saying that Rosaleen is in fact "dumb" for getting herself jailed in the first place and

⁶ Interestingly, Trites main example of "*in locos parentis*" in her novel is the relationship between Huck and Jim in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*, 60). Lily and Rosaleen's relationship faces many of the same racial tensions, and even similarities in plot, as Jim and Huck's relationship.

being ungrateful for Lily's rescue (54). In this scene, the reader can see Lily acting, unintentionally perhaps, on the racist upbringing she received from T. Ray. Luckily, for both the reader and Lily, Lily is redeemed only a few paragraphs later. After Lily yells at Rosaleen on the riverbank, she wakes up to find Rosaleen gone. In this moment Lily begins to express truly her deep love for Rosaleen. Lily begs, "*Please, God. I didn't mean to treat her like a pet dog. I was trying to save her. That's all*" (54). It is at this moment that Lily imagines she is feeling the same sense of guilt she feels on Mother's Day. Much like she wishes her mother could forgive her, Lily now wishes Rosaleen would forgive her for treating her poorly. This scene reminds readers that, despite the social ramifications of their relationship and Lily's inability to escape completely her inherently racist upbringing, Lily views Rosaleen as a maternal figure. Essentially, the bond between Lily and Rosaleen shows increasing interracial community, as Ellen was unable to establish the same sort of relationship with Starletta's mother.

While Naomi does not have to cross racial lines, her Mexican heritage is a factor that has the power to isolate her from classmates. Since she lives with her maternal "white" family, her visible differences are constant reminders of her father's Mexican blood. In the first few pages of the novel, Naomi highlights her visible difference when she explains, "Owen called me the peanut butter sandwich between two pieces of white bread, meaning him and Gram" (Ryan 11). While this metaphor evokes a sense of unity – with Naomi acting as the "glue" that holds the family together—it also shows Naomi's awareness of her own physical separation as a result of her Mexican ancestry. Within her family context, Naomi is accepted. However, at the beginning of the text it seems as if the same physical differences that make her unique in her family also isolate her from the larger white community—mainly at school. Naomi explains her lack of popularity by saying she is not "one of the makeup-sleepover girls" (53). While it is possible

that Naomi would be isolated despite her ethnic difference, the teasing of other students – calling her a “*Mexican bandido*”—implies that her ethnicity is at least one explanation for her isolation (67). Even her American last name – Outlaw—reminds readers that she at least feels like an outcast in her school setting. Naomi’s “predisposition to brown-ness (eyes, hair, skin),” highlights the sense of disconnection she feels from the white community in the novel (11).

While Naomi’s ethnicity makes her feel isolated from her white community, her inability to embrace fully her parental Mexican ancestry prevents her from connecting with her ethnic identity in the beginning of the novel. This tension is most clearly highlighted when Naomi comments on her inability to speak Spanish: “A body would think that since I was half Mexican I could speak the language, too, but I couldn’t...the words felt like marbles moving around in my mouth” (Ryan 35). The fact that Naomi does not speak Spanish – a key aspect of Mexican culture – means that she literally and metaphorically cannot completely connect with the culture. This becomes an issue when she first meets her friend Blanca:

But at morning recess [Blanca] came right up to me and started chattering away. I didn’t understand two words she said. “I don’t speak Spanish,” I finally told her... “You’re not Mexican? Funny you look Mexican.” (53).

In this scene, Naomi had a chance to relate to someone because of similar physical traits. However, because she lacks the communication skills needed, the chance for a connection based on a shared ethnicity was lost. While Blanca and Naomi end up connecting despite this moment, this scene highlights how Naomi is not able to embrace completely her heritage at the beginning of the novel. Early on, Naomi seems to be suspended between two worlds – the white world of her upbringing and the Mexican world of her father’s heritage. Her inability to identify completely with one aspect of her identity implies race is originally a dividing force in *Becoming Naomi León*.

As the story of each young female protagonist develops, each girl is more able to overcome the potential of race or ethnicity to divide individuals. Just as Ellen Foster has the hardest time overcoming her inherent racism, she is also the protagonist who has the least long-lived relationship with members of the greater African-American community. Aside from her best friend Starletta, Ellen's strongest interactions with members of the black community occur while staying with her maternal grandmother (Gibbons 60). A week into her visit, her grandmother drives her out to "the cotton field" at dawn and tells her to "ask a nigger what to do" (63). Although Ellen quickly gets to work "chopping [her] row," she seems surprised as her parents had always "hired colored people to do [her] part of the slave labor" on their farm (63). Ellen admits she "never figured it would be [her] one day" (63). It is important that Ellen's submersion is in a black working community doing hard manual labor, as her transformation has both physical and figurative manifestations. As she becomes closer with the workers in the field, her once pale skin becomes so tanned from the sun that she "could pass for colored now" (66). Her physical ability to blend in with the black workers parallels her inclusion in the society, as she becomes friends with Mavis, an older female field worker.

Mavis serves as a maternal figure who helps Ellen "unlearn the racism of her familial and cultural environment" (Munafò 57). She facilitates Ellen's adjustment to the field work by telling her what to wear, showing her how to cool off, and helping her catch up when Ellen falls behind (Gibbons 64). She is also the only character in the entire book who tells Ellen about her mother before she married Ellen's father. In doing so, Mavis allows Ellen to "claim her maternal inheritance" (Munafò 57).⁷ These moments breathe life into Ellen's mother, reestablishing Ellen's maternal connection. However, Mavis' most important contribution as a character is that

⁷ Mavis tells Ellen that she "never knownd anybody sweet like [her] mama," explains her mother was "smart as a whip" and that Ellen looks exactly like her mother (Gibbons 65).

she unintentionally helps Ellen's "reconfiguration" of her familial ideals (55). Each night, Ellen observes Mavis and her family from afar. It is during her time "easedropping at the colored house [that she] started a list of all that a family should have" (Gibbons 67). Thus, Mavis' family comes to serve as a model for Ellen's ideal family except for two important details: Ellen wants "one white and with a little more money" (67). This distinction shows that, while Ellen has come to embrace Mavis and see value in her family life, Ellen is not able to accept completely a black family as her own family. Furthermore, because Ellen is "only spying" on Mavis' family, her "assessment of a family unit is much more a projection of her own desires than an empirical experience of a particular household," thus reinforcing the role of whiteness in defining Ellen's search for a home (Monteith 62). Throughout the novel Ellen is only able to define her ideal family in terms of its race.

While Ellen is limited by the transience of her racial interactions, Lily has the chance to completely immerse herself in an African-American community. In many ways, living at the Boatwrights' house is a step further than Ellen – who was only able to observe, and not enter, Mavis' home. Arriving with her black stand-in mother to a home of three black sisters, Lily is literally the only white individual in her new home. She highlights her awareness of race when she says,

I felt that somehow I belonged here...but I could have been in the Congo for how unfamiliar it felt. Staying in a colored house with colored women...it was not something I was against, but I was brand-new to it, and my skin had never felt so white to me. (Kidd 78)

While Lily may not harbor the same innate prejudices against African-Americans as Ellen, she does admit that August's "*intelligent*" and "*cultured*" ways came as a surprise to her, revealing Lily's subconscious ignorance (78). The longer Lily and Rosaleen stay at the Boatwright home, the more Lily realizes her whiteness. Days spent with the sisters and other black women from

the community make Lily think “*I am not one of you*” (111). When Rosaleen moves into the main house (leaving Lily alone in the shed), Lily is literally and symbolically distanced her from the intimate relationship forming between Rosaleen and the Boatwrights. Rosaleen begins to take the place of April (one of the Boatwright sisters who dies before the novel begins) as she inhabits her bed and cares for April’s twin sister May. Lily’s feelings of isolation, as a result of her whiteness, are intensified as Rosaleen becomes a clear part of the family and June (the middle sister) continues to ostracize Lily. Unlike Ellen, who only uses Mavis’ black family as a model for her own white foster family, Lily desires to be a part of the Boatwright family.

Eventually, Lily becomes part of the household, but only with the help of August Boatwright. Much like Mavis, August tells Lily the story of her mother’s life, thus freeing Lily from the crippling grief she had been feeling for years. August is the first person to tell Lily she is not “unlovable” and is in fact “the most dear, most lovable girl” (Kidd 242). She is also the first one to tell Lily that the night her mother was killed she had been coming back to get Lily, not abandon her (254). Thus, a black female is the one to facilitate a connection between the suffering protagonist and her mother. It is only after she is liberated from this oppressive guilt that Lily is able to move forward with her life and stand up to her father by telling him she will not return home (298). The fact that Lily gains back her self-respect, frees herself from guilt, and stands up to white patriarchal power while living with four black women suggests that the potential for power rests in unexpected places (at least unexpected in the timeframe of the novel). One problematic aspect is that Lily must completely desert white society in order to find a home with the Boatwrights, suggesting that she must choose either a black family or a white family.⁸

⁸ Her disconnection from white society is displayed at the end of the novel when, having only black friends, Lily is called a “nigger lover” by the kids at school (Kidd 301). While this certainly reflects the problem of racism in 1960s white society, it ultimately means Lily cannot be accepted by both white and black society at the same time.

Lily is basically completely isolated from her previous white racist society, giving Lily a false sense of an integrated society. The tenuous nature of this interracial community is most clearly displayed when Lily and Zach (a black beekeeper who works for the Boatwright sisters) pursue their semi-romantic relationship off the Boatwrights' property and attend a movie. Zach is arrested, and Lily is reminded that white society is not ready for that level of race mixing. Despite the unrealistic elements of Lily's life, unlike Ellen – whose father simply dies while Ellen is at her grandmother's – Lily is able to assert her independence and dominance by standing up to her father's abusive demands. Thus, this story shows the ability of a young white female to challenge white patriarchal power as a result of her empowerment by black women.⁹

While Lily's abandonment of a white community is one concern, many critics condemn *The Secret Life of Bees* for its portrayal of the "Magical Negro" character. Critic Laurie Grobman, in "Teaching Cross-Racial Texts: Cultural Theft in *The Secret Life of Bees*," asserts that Kidd propagates black stereotypes as she "appropriates the black feminine divine to heal and nourish her white protagonist" (12). The level of "cultural theft" – as she claims Kidd uses "black characters, literature, and culture" only to "elevate whiteness" – complicates Lily's interactions with race (10). Grobman claims that all black characters in the novel – including the black Madonna—are merely there to serve as Lily's mother figures (14-15). Grobman also likens both Rosaleen and August to the archetypal "Mammy" character, saying they "fit this bill perfectly" (12).¹⁰ While we have already seen how Lily benefits from these maternal characters, the novel's structure seems to transform Rosaleen and the Boatwright sisters into vehicles for Lily's growth. Kidd may depict a stronger bond between her white protagonist and black

⁹ Jones discusses women's "interracial bonds" as a way to challenge patriarchy in *Race Mixing* (72-78).

¹⁰ Grobman describes the "Mammy" character as follows, "Mammy, the faithful, devoted family servant who is asexual because she is a surrogate mother to the white family's children. She is nurturing and spiritual, stronger emotionally and spiritually than white women" (12).

individuals than Gibbons. Yet, in creating an empowered white protagonist, Kidd limits the agency of the black female characters. Essentially, the stereotyping of black characters suggests Kidd's failure to depict an interracial community accurately and fairly.

While Lily and Ellen mix with the opposite race on a journey towards finding a new home, Naomi must rediscover her own mixed heritage in order to reconnect with her father. It is important that Naomi's father—her main link to Mexican ethnicity—is absent from most of the story but not depicted in a negative light. Naomi overhears a teacher explain to another that Naomi's father had “wanted [her and her brother] at one time, but the mother wouldn't allow it” (Ryan 74). The fact that it was her mother who prevented her father from being part of their lives allows the reader – and potentially Naomi—to view the mother as a destructive character and the father as an innocent man. Likewise, the father continually “sends a sizable amount [of money to Gram] a couple of times a year” (80). Their father's monetary support might not substitute for a present father figure, but it still allows the reader to view the paternal character as a responsible and trustworthy man. Thus, when Naomi, her family, and her Mexican neighbors Fabiola and Bernardo embark on their trip to Mexico, it is seen as a positive journey. Fabiola and Bernardo are representations of Naomi's Mexican culture – Gram explains they “always felt kin to [Naomi], being that [her] dad was from their town” (29). The couple acts as mediators who literally and figuratively guide Naomi through her ethnic rediscovery (29).

While the ultimate goal of the family's Mexico excursion is to have their father sign custody papers, it is also a chance for Naomi to “know [her] Mexican history” and get “exposed to [her] Mexican side” (Ryan 131, 29). Nonetheless, the trip is not without its hurdles. Just as Ellen and Lily had to overcome their prejudices regarding race in order to find happiness, Naomi must conquer her assumptions and fears about Mexico and her Mexican heritage. Naomi

composes a list of “Regular and Everyday Worries about Mexico,” based primarily on rumors from the playground (140). Her worries include, getting “thrown in jail for absolutely no reason,” being put up for ransom, getting murdered, getting sick, and living in a country where “everyone peed on the side of the road so the whole country smelled” (140-141). In order to find a sense of community in Mexico, Naomi must be able to overcome these prejudices – representative of her American upbringing and her disconnection from her Mexican culture. Small aspects of her identity – such as her middle name “Soledad,” which is “a very special name” in her father’s hometown—help her forge and mend a link to her ancestry (150). She eventually finds a home in her father’s hometown after they are reunited. Later, when Naomi goes to court so Gram can fight for custody, it is the encouraging words of her father, “Be brave, Naomi León,” that give Naomi the courage to stand up to her mother during their trial (226-235).¹¹ Overall, readers of Naomi’s story are able to see how ethnic connections allow Naomi to rediscover a lost identity.

As with Scout, a fundamental part of Ellen’s, Lily’s, and Naomi’s maturation is exposure to the societal structure of race or ethnicity. However, with each consecutive work, the protagonist’s ability to develop agency as a result of such challenges is increased. Gibbons and Kidd, sticking with the motif of interracial relationships, face struggles as they attempt to depict a young white girl’s interactions with black individuals. Ellen, who is arguably the most racist protagonist, may surmount some of her personal prejudices. Yet, the end of her story – as she finds happiness in an all white home – suggests Ellen has merely employed interracial interactions as a means to finding a white-washed happiness. In *The Secret Life of Bees*, Kidd avoids the problems of Ellen by immersing Lily in a black family. In turn, the novel reveals

¹¹ During a custody trial between Gram and Naomi’s mother, Naomi (empowered by her father’s words) takes the stand and voices her desire to remain living with Gram and Owen.

issues regarding the stereotyping and marginalization of black characters. These two novels seem to display the potential problems that may arise when tracing a young white girl's maturation through interactions with black individuals. In Ellen's case, her all white home reminds readers that she never truly explored the world of interracial acceptance. In Lily's case, her immersion in a black community means she becomes totally isolated from her white community – implying that racial acceptance can only be successful in individual cases. Looking to *Becoming Naomi León*, as the most modern of these four texts, reveals a potentially new way to challenge racial or ethnic structures. In lieu of race relations, Ryan investigates ethnic identity. Thus, Ryan prevents issues of racial marginalization, as Naomi challenges the social norms of her own ethnic heritage rather than those of another race. These differences are important, as the more successful the protagonist is at breaking-down racial and ethnic barriers, the more likely she is to develop.

Creative Expression and Development

Not only do Ellen, Lily, and Naomi participate in greater interracial and ethnic exchanges than Scout, they also have personal forms of creative expression completely missing from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. There are two reasons why creative expression helps each more recent protagonist develop agency. In reference to each girl's general search for healing, each protagonist's creative expression is intrinsically tied to her maternal trauma. In *Writing the Woman Artist: Essays on Poetics, Politics, and Portraiture*, Suzanne W. Jones discusses the idea that, as Virginia Woolf argued, female artists are constantly "Thinking Back through [their] Mothers" (6).¹² The link creativity forges between the artistic and maternal figure is important in

¹² Suzanne Jones borrows this phrase from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* to establish the mother-daughter link as well as the larger link between female artistic expressions.

these adolescent novels, as it offers each girl a sense of healing from her maternal loss. Secondly, creativity provides Ellen, Lily, and Naomi with tools to understand and interact with race. Their success in doing so is mirrored by their level of creative ability. Scout, who lacks an interactive relationship with race, also lacks a form of creative expression. Essentially, creative expression becomes a metaphor for agency, as creative expression shows that the adolescent female is “learning to use her voice” (Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 63).¹³ While each girl’s creative expression provides her with an outlet for communication and development, the level of her creative success mirrors the level of her triumph over racial and ethnic boundaries. Creative expression takes a different form in each work: Ellen paints, Lily keeps bees, and Naomi carves. The form of the creativity and the girl’s relationship to her form of expression determine how successful this metaphor is at providing a larger conversation about race or ethnicity.

In *Ellen Foster*, Ellen’s relationship with art is segregated from her relationships with race throughout the story. Both Ellen and her artistic ability are immature and underdeveloped at the beginning of the novel. Ellen first discusses art when she says she bought herself “two variety packs of construction paper” for Christmas (Gibbons 28). The fact that this paper is something she has “been dying for” shows the reader that Ellen has a desire to express herself artistically (27). Ellen’s artistic ability begins to develop when she temporarily moves in with her art teacher Julia and her husband Roy. She explains, “every Sunday” she, Julia, and Roy would “all three lay on the floor drawing each other with blue hair or two noses or something silly” (47). This moment of familial unity is the first sense of security Ellen has experienced since her rape and her mother’s death. This family unity is also apparent when the three

¹³ While this chapter is primarily focused on the art form of writing (a form that is evocative of a written voice), I would contend that other art forms can serve the same purpose as they allow girls to express themselves.

characters garden together. Ellen's healing is furthered during her time working in the garden, when she would think of her "mama and the way she liked to work in the cool of the morning" (49). Julia and Roy's artistic home not only allows Ellen to feel a sense of comfort and belonging, it also allows her to remember her mother in a positive light.¹⁴

Ellen's art form (painting) is a very traditional form of creative expression. It is important that Ellen's true artistic expression begins when she receives her birthday gift from a white couple, Julia and Roy—"a round thing with colored pencils stood up in circles and circles...[and] oil paints" (Gibbons 52). Ellen explains these oil paints are real oil paints like Julia's, so "you can use them to paint something the way it is supposed to be not all watered down but strong" (52). Ellen's explanation of art as something that should be "strong" and not something you can "change," mirrors the desires she has for a family (her ideal family is strong and stable). Unlike her previous guardians, who abandoned her, died on her, and gave her up, Ellen wants a family that can be real for her – like the oil paints. Although Starletta is present when Julia and Roy give Ellen her gift, it is clear that Ellen's more mature artistic expression will not be something she shares with Starletta. Ellen tells Starletta, "do not even think about it [touching the supplies]. I am serious about this art supply. You can have my old crayons if you need something to ruin" (52). Although Ellen's comment is a literal reaction to Starletta's carelessness, this harsh remark also seems to suggest the separation between Ellen's artistic world and her interactions with Starletta. Figuratively, Ellen's refusal to include Starletta in her artistic pursuits implies Ellen's artistic development is restricted by her refusal to cross racial lines.

¹⁴ Giavanna Munfao asserts that, during Ellen's time at this home, she first "converts the telling and retelling of that 'one season' of happiness (a fantasy) into a reenactment of such pleasure and well-being (a reality)" (56).

Although Ellen may limit her artistic expression to white individuals by not allowing Starletta to share her artistic endeavors, not all of the white individuals in Ellen's story are appreciative of her talent. When Ellen moves in with her Aunt Nadine and her cousin Dora, she asks for "a handypack of white paper" for Christmas – an appropriate request considering the "whiteness" of Ellen's artistic form (Gibbons 104). In return, Ellen decides to use her "talent in art" and "make a picture fit for them to hang on a wall" (105). Ellen spends a lot of time considering the type of picture they would like, even though she only wants to paint "brooding oceans" (106).¹⁵ This highlights, in a sense, Ellen's increasing maturity—she desires to please them by completing this nice gesture. When Ellen gives them the gift, Ellen's aunt reacts by calling the picture "cute," while Ellen claims "it is not cute and it is not a game.... I had tried to appeal to somebody and look at them now making fun of me" (109). This scene shows that not all individuals in Ellen's life are capable of appreciating her art in the same way as Julia and Roy. However, this scene is also important because it is a catalyst in Ellen's life. The next morning, still filled with "anger and shame," Ellen, watching as Dora opens all of her presents, wishes she could see Starletta (109). While wondering why she hates Dora and does not "hate Starletta," Ellen reaches her breaking point. After throwing her white paper at their feet – a symbolic image of Ellen breaking away from her old mentality – Ellen leaves their home (111).

It is only when Ellen's artistic talent is insulted that she is able to understand, on some level, her previous racist assumptions. Ellen is finally mature enough to understand that love and hate are not decided by family ties and not limited by race. Still, Ellen leaves her aunt's home only to find another white home, and so there remains little hope that Ellen truly has a better

¹⁵ It is interesting that Ellen's favorite scene to paint is an ocean, a sort of landscape. The ocean seems to both support traditional forms of painting while also revealing the sense of uneasiness ("brooding") experienced by Ellen.

understanding of race.¹⁶ At the end of the novel, Ellen feels “ashamed” that she “put down white” when listing qualities of the ideal home, and even imagines she might have been “cut out to be colored and got bleached” (Gibbons 85). On the surface, her sleepover with Starletta at the end of the novel signifies a figurative and literal communion between black and white individuals. Yet, the inability of such interactions to maintain themselves on a large scale outside of Ellen’s foster home leaves readers wondering how likely it is that such ideal moments will continue in her future.

Much like Ellen’s artistic development, Lily’s relationship with beekeeping is something that allows her to find some sense of healing.¹⁷ Lily begins her search for the Boatwright household based solely on her mother’s picture of a black Virgin Mary (Kidd 52). The fact that this picture is pasted on each jar of the Boatwrights’ honey seems to suggest that Lily’s quest for family also begins as a quest for creative expression. Furthermore, the fact that the picture was her mother’s – and that her mother is thus connected in some way to the art of beekeeping – helps forge a link between Lily and her dead mother throughout the story. Lily instantly feels happy at the Boatwright home, calling the first week “a pure relief,” as Lily proves to be “a marvel” at beekeeping, a born natural (82,84). When Lily claims “beeswax was a miracle cure for everything,” she seems to foreshadow the way beekeeping will help heal her of her pain (84). The bees serve as both a literal and figurative healing force. In a literal sense, the time spent at the Boatwrights (which is defined by beekeeping) and the distraction of the work help Lily forget “the motherless place” that aches inside of her (151). Yet, there are also moments of spirituality when Lily’s communion with the bees seems to offer her some fulfillment. Lily, describing the

¹⁶ Munfao asserts that the end of the novel still portrays a naive Ellen as “Ellen’s imagined reunion wherein she and Starletta will finally be ‘even’ is more wishful thinking than likely outcome” (59).

¹⁷ For more see Judith Hebb’s article “Conflict and Closure: Bees and Honey as Metaphors for Healing in *The Secret Life of Bees*.”

bees swarming around her, alludes to this feeling: “I felt dropped into a field of enchanted clover that made me immune to everything” (150). Of course, the bees are not able to fully cure Lily in a literal sense; she must first hear the story of her mother from August Boatwright. Nonetheless, beekeeping – which connects August and Lily – becomes part of the reason Lily is able to forgive herself for her mother’s murder. The honey the women create, naturally sticky and adhesive, creates bonds among the three sisters, the sisters and Lily, and Lily and her mother.

Lily’s creative development as a beekeeper is also significant because it features a complete submergence in the world of beekeeping. Although beekeeping is the profession of the Boatwrights sisters, it “rises to the level of art as it ‘feed[s] the creative spirit’ (Grobman 20).¹⁸ While Ellen’s art is aided by her art teacher, the majority of the novel reveals the independent nature of Ellen’s artistic endeavors. Furthermore, Ellen’s removal from Julia’s house reminds readers that a completely artistic existence is an unrealistic hope for Ellen. By contrast, Lily is surrounded by beekeeping as soon as she arrives at the Boatwrights and throughout the rest of the novel. The extent of Lily’s immersion is evident from the moment August decides Lily and Rosaleen can stay at the house. After which, August directs them to the honey house – the room where all of the honey making takes place (Kidd 75). The fact that Lily and Rosaleen also sleep in the honey house seems to imply that they literally eat, breath, and sleep honey (76). After Rosaleen moves into the main house, Lily is left alone in the honey house to heal metaphorically through her creative expression. More than Ellen, Lily’s creative development is a constant aspect of the novel, and thus it plays a more central role in Lily’s healing process.

¹⁸ In Grobman’s article she discusses Walker’s “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” as a text that “urges black women artists to find inspiration and strength in their foremothers – older black women who, often precluded from ‘mainstream’ art forms” (20). In a literal sense, beekeeping is a form of employment for the Boatwright sisters. However, within the context of the novel, beekeeping also doubles as a form of creative expression for the women.

Lily is totally immersed in her interracial and creative ventures as both help her heal from maternal trauma. However, the “blackness” of her art form – it is a trademark of the Boatwright family – complicate Lily’s relationship with her creative expression. It may seem as if the intrinsic link between art and race would allow Lily to dive deeper into racial interactions and creative expression. Yet, Lily’s creative expression is completely reliant on the Boatwright family. Unlike Ellen, who can bring her art supplies anywhere, Lily can only produce honey while on the Boatwrights’ property. Much like Lily’s idealized interracial home, her art form has a very tenuous nature as it (like interracial relations) can only exist on August’s property. Thus, while Lily’s creative form facilitates greater interracial communion, it is limited in the sense that (at this point in her life) Lily cannot truly own the form of creative expression.

While creative expression is a recurring motif between the three more modern novels, *Becoming Naomi León* features the most intimate connection between racial or ethnic interactions and creative expression. Previously, creative expression had been used as a way to talk about and explore varying levels of interracial interactions. Yet, in Naomi’s story, her art form and the rediscovering of her ethnic identity are inextricably linked. This connection is made clear as Naomi’s art facilitates healing by connecting Naomi with her father – her link to Mexican ethnicity. From early in the novel, it is clear that Naomi’s father’s carving is one of her only memories of him. She remembers the night of the storm, the last time she saw her father: “to get my mind off the thunder and lightning, he found a bar of soap and carved an elephant. He gave it to me, and I fell asleep clutching it” (Ryan 34). Naomi also has the same talent for soap carving, and it is something she has been doing since before her story begins. Bernardo, Naomi’s Mexican neighbor, claimed she “was born to it,” and provided her with her first bar of soap when she “was too young to remember” (13). Bernardo—a male character—also forges a

link between Naomi and her father when he says, “Naomi has the heart of a carver, like her father” (93). While Lily and Ellen only refine their artistic skills once they meet their new stand-in parents, Naomi is carving soap from a young age before she even begins to look for her father. Thus, the reader is able to see Naomi’s creative ability as something intrinsic to her person.

Not only does Naomi’s art unite her with her father, it also divides her from her mother. While the other two novels are focused on healing from maternal trauma by creating a positive relationship with the protagonist’s deceased mother, Naomi’s story is focused on the disintegration of a maternal bond. When Naomi’s mother first arrives, Naomi attempts to play the role of the perfect daughter, believing that her mother will fill the shoes of the perfect mother. However, on Thanksgiving all facades are dissolved. After realizing that her mother only planned on adopting her – and not her brother Owen – Naomi realizes her true family is her great-grandmother and her brother, not her mother and her new boyfriend Clive. This is highlighted when Naomi’s mother explains that “[the children’s] father was *obsessed* with carving...and not in a good way” (Ryan 92). While Gram proudly displays the soap carvings as the table’s centerpiece, Naomi’s mother seems to undermine their value as artistic pieces by mocking the art form. Clive—a character symbolic of Naomi’s mother’s new life—is also unable to see the worth of her soap carving. As Naomi walks past the bathroom she notices “something wadded up on the edge of the sink. It was Clive’s napkin...He had taken [her] bluebird of happiness from the Thanksgiving table and used it to wash the turkey grease from his hands” (100). Clive disrespects Naomi’s creative expression when he is unable to see the soap carving as anything more than a piece of soap he can use to wash his hands. Clive’s actions seem to suggest that an essential part of Naomi’s being – her creativity—will not be appreciated if she lives with her mother. This scene reworks the traditional image of an idealized mother.

While *Becoming Naomi León* differs from the previous novels because it depicts a disintegration of the maternal bond and a restoration of the paternal bond, Naomi also has an ownership over her creative form that both Ellen and Lily lack. Lily may be more linked to beekeeping than Ellen is to drawing, but Lily is ultimately given the art of beekeeping by a member of the opposite race. The origins of the beekeeping may provide for an interaction between Lily and the Boatwrights, but Lily's creative expression is not intrinsic to her being. Naomi's creative expression belongs to her in a way that none of the other main characters experience. When Naomi first becomes a soap carver, the reader learns "it was art from...Oaxaca, far away in Mexico" and that Naomi's family "is a famous carving family in Oaxaca" (Ryan 13, 93). Thus, Naomi, by birth, is literally and metaphorically given this talent for carving. The theme of inheritance is reinforced when Naomi's father misses the famous radish carving contest in Oaxaca and worries that "it is the first year that a León did not carve in the contest" (216). Naomi, able to produce her winning radish carving, proves that this creative talent allows her to connect not only with her father, but also with her larger extended family. Naomi's art form is most successful, as it is intrinsically tied to her ethnicity, allows for familial communion, and is based on the creation of art for art's sake.

Overall, each of the three protagonists in these adolescent novels has some sort of creative development that allows her to develop a sense of agency by the end of the novel. Interestingly, the importance of art in each work parallels each protagonist's relationship with race or ethnicity. Ellen has little mixed interaction with race and ultimately finds a home with a white family. Thus, her art—although it potentially makes her aware of her past racist ways – is very much confined to the sphere of "whiteness." Ellen's art parallels her limited interactions with race, as her painting develops *alongside*, but not because of, her racial interactions. Lily's

story begins to bridge the gap between *Ellen Foster* and *Becoming Naomi León*. Both her racial interactions and her creative expression require a complete submergence in a black community. While this may raise questions of cultural theft, the fact that Lily's art form was given to her by a member of the opposite race shows a crossing of traditional racial lines. *The Secret Life of Bees* furthers the potential of art as a motif for agency by allowing creative expression and racial interaction to intermingle. Yet, it is Naomi's story that completes the trajectory by offering a situation where art and ethnicity are inseparable. Naomi's story is the only true *kunstlerroman*—a “novel of the artist”—as Naomi's maturation is most clearly defined by her creative endeavors (“*Kunstlerroman*”). Finally, Naomi begins a quest to build a relationship with her father – unlike Lily and Ellen – and thus, her art form is a direct link to her Mexican culture. The end of her story—as she completes her artistic development before even meeting her father – highlights the way that creative expression can provide the protagonist with self-discovered agency.

Constant Evolution

In a historical sense, these four novels represent our constant revision of the way American society speaks about issues of race and racial identity. By choosing to employ racial and ethnic interaction as the vehicle that brings their protagonists to a sense of healing and growth, these authors involve themselves in a larger discussion about the crucial role interracial and ethnic experiences play in the coming-of-age process (on both a national and individual level). As time passes, each new author revises the way adolescent females challenge racial boundaries. *To Kill a Mockingbird* portrays racism and racial issues without directly involving Scout in the action. While an *understanding* of such issues is crucial to Scout's growth, she remains removed from the consequences of a more in depth interaction. *Ellen Foster* depicts

fleeting interactions with race, and by the end of the novel Ellen has begun to rethink her racist ways. However, her all white household reminds readers that interracial community will not be an extensive part of Ellen's future growth. Lily has a more intense exposure to race, as she is immersed in the Boatwrights' community and ultimately transcends her father's toxic racism when she accepts the black Boatwright household over any white home. However, the fragile nature of such interracial communities within *The Secret Life of Bees* suggests that Kidd does not really offer readers a solution to racism, but rather a way for one girl to exchange metaphorical "whiteness" for "blackness." While these three novels may not offer a complete answer to the question regarding race's role in maturation, they do reveal the constant evolution of this genre (literature concerned with race and young female development).

Of course, historical context limits Lee (writing about the 30s in the 50s), Gibbons (writing about the 70s or 80s), and Kidd (writing about the 60s) in their depiction of successful interracial interactions. However, writing in and about the age of multiculturalism—an age in which authors explore alternatives to the black-white question – Ryan can address the role of ethnicity rather than race. The idea that ethnicity can also be viewed much like racial identity has made the question of racial interaction more complex. Yet, the move towards a more multifaceted understanding of race and racial interactions has given modern authors the freedom to rework older themes in new refreshing ways. Because Naomi's interactions with race are essentially a rediscovery of her ethnic identity, Ryan has the opportunity to offer Naomi a sense of ownership over her interactions that both Ellen and Lily lack. Ryan's story conveys the idea that one can have successful bonds with both ethnicities—reuniting with her Mexican father before returning home with her American great-grandmother. Naomi is not required to limit her interactions with her father (as Ellen must with Starletta) or abandon her maternal grandmother

when she embraces her Mexican heritage (as Lily must with her whiteness). Even the title of *Becoming Naomi León* suggests a rediscovery of one's own identity.

These four novels may seem dissimilar, yet when viewed as a continuum, they can shed light on the progression of adolescent literature. In the 1960s, *To Kill a Mockingbird* helped lay the ground work for future adolescent novels that are primarily concerned with the role race plays in female development. Since then, novels such as *Ellen Foster*, *The Secret Life of Bees*, and *Becoming Naomi León* have brought up similar issues. Yet, it is only when these four books are read alongside one another that we can begin to see the evolution of a feminist adolescent novel. One way the later three novels begin to reach towards a feminist novel is by exploring the use of creative expression as a metaphor for agency. If creative expression helps forge a link between the protagonist and her racial interactions (as it does with Naomi), then such creativity reveals the protagonist's ability to use her voice. As each protagonist gains this increasing agency, she is able to "recognize and rely on traits that gave [her] literary foremothers strength" (Trites, *Waking*, 5). As Trites explains, the most "powerful" feminist adolescent novels "reverse traditional gender roles" through a "reliance on the protagonist's agency" (5). Creativity gives female protagonists a form of expression so crucial to the development of agency. Thus, it seems the author must perfect the link between race or ethnicity and creativity in order to achieve the creation of a feminist adolescent novel.

My argument, which culminates with *Becoming Naomi León*, searches for a protagonist who is not only aware of her ability to "enact her own decisions," but uses such agency to challenge authority figures (5). Scout, lacking agency, does little to challenge the rightful authority of her father. Ellen, a character with a bit more agency, rebels against her aunt and female cousin by leaving their home and arriving at the foster house. Lily, slightly more

empowered by her interracial relations, is able to stand up to the paradigm of patriarchal power, her father. Yet, it is Naomi, the protagonist with the most agency, who most visibly takes control of her life. Naomi defies the maternal character, the primary figure in a young girl's life, when she stands up for herself in court. When she takes the stand to express her wish to live with Gram rather than her mother, Naomi asserts herself in the court of law, a symbol of governmental control. Thus, Naomi has the most literal rebellion against social constructs. By building upon the works of her literary foremothers, Ryan is able to convey, most powerfully, the importance of enacting change in the prevailing social constructs of gender and race. While each of these four novels challenges a dominant social code by depicting protagonists who attempt to cross racial lines, it is not until we reach the twenty-first century that we find a novel able to convey the most positive message to young contemporary female readers. These four novels trace the evolution of a genre which "empower[s] girls to recognize and claim their subject positions" and in doing so, this modern genre can "empower the entire culture," as new authors break down the "ancient symbols of female repression" (Trites, *Waking*, 137, 139). Hopefully, this genre of novels will continue to evolve, so literature for young female readers may constantly meet the needs of future generations.

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