

The Politics of Representation:

A Critical Discussion of Feminist Spirituality, the Black Madonna Figure and Race in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002)

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Master's Thesis in English Literature and Culture

University of Bergen

November 2020

Abstract

På overflaten er *Bienes hemmelige liv* (2002) av Sue Monk Kidd en uproblematisk, enkel og populær modningsroman som skildrer en ung jentes søken etter sannheten om sin mors død. Handlingen er satt til sommeren 1964 i Sør-Carolina, i de fiktive byene Sylvan og Tiburon. Hovedpersonen, Lily, som er 14 år denne sommeren, har også fortellerstemmen i boken. Hun rømmer sammen med hushjelpen og reservemoren sin, Rosaleen, fra Sylvan hvor hun bor med faren sin på ferskenfarmen hans. I sin søken etter svar får Lily leget sine egne sår og skyldfølelse vedrørende sin hånd i morens død, samt tilfredsstilt sin lengsel etter en morsfigur når hun tilbringer tid hos de afro-amerikanske Boatwright-søstrene i Tiburon.

Boken har blitt framsnakket fordi den inkluderer og synliggjør flere afro-amerikanske karakterer og deres levesett og utfordringer i denne tidsperioden, samt at den setter søkelys på kjærlighetens legende kraft til både å transcendere raseproblematikk og å reparere raserelasjoner, i tillegg til å være uttalt feministisk. Alle de overnevnte aspektene er temaer som mange amerikanere er opptatt av og som preger hverdagen til amerikanere som lever i et multikulturelt samfunn. I tillegg er boken oversatt til 36 språk, har solgt 8 millioner kopier og blir bruk i undervisning på flere nivå i USA.

På tross av bokens popularitet, den positive kritikken den har mottatt og den tilsynelatende enkle handlingen, viser romanen seg å være mer kompleks enn først antatt ved nærmere undersøkelser. Hovedgrunnen til dette er at de fleste karakterene i boken er afro-amerikanske – i tillegg til en farget jomfru Maria statue – og at både forfatteren og hovedpersonen i boken er hvite amerikanere. De afro-amerikanske karakterene er delaktige i og avgjørende for den hvite karakteren sin modningsprosess, de driver handlingen i boken framover og blir også brukt som fysisk og psykisk støtte til den hvite hovedkarakteren. Det problematiske er at disse karakterene blir brukt som statister og brikker i en fortelling fortalt av en hvit hovedperson som handler om hvit sårleging og modning. Dette sår tvil om boken evner å være medhjelper i reparasjonen som trengs mellom grupperinger i USA i dag, som mange kan mene at er en av hovedgrunnene til bokens popularitet.

På bakgrunn av dette undersøkes den fargede jomfru Maria statuen som blir tilbudt i stuen til de afro-amerikanske Boatwright søstrene i relasjon til feministisk spiritualitet og appropriering. I tillegg studeres framstillingen av to afro-amerikanske karakterer, Rosaleen og August, som begge har en nær relasjon til hovedpersonen. I begge disse sammenhengene har jeg utvidet begrepet appropriering til å gjelde i en litterær kontekst. I feministisk spiritualitet – (og nyreligiøsitet) som en reell bevegelse i det amerikanske samfunnet – ser vi at appropriering ofte blir brukt som et bevisst og ubevisst ledd i en hvit selvhelningsprosess som oppleves som nødvendig på grunn av hvit skyldfølelse for svart lidelse. Den samme prosessen blir gjentatt i boken som analyseres, men på et annet nivå og i en litterær kontekst. Det interessante her er å avdekke hvordan representasjonene og bruken av karakterene i boken indirekte kaster lys over holdninger hvite amerikanere kan ha til afro-amerikanere. Disse holdningene kan knyttes tilbake til kolonisering og maktmisbruk på tross av de bakenforliggende gode intensjonene for bokens opprinnelse som synes å ha sin kilde i feministisk spiritualitet, nyreligiøsitet og feminisme, samt et ønske om å reparere og hele relasjonen mellom raser i USA.

Acknowledgements

I wish to extend my sincere gratitude, appreciation and thank you to my current supervisor Zeljka Svrljuga and my initial, late supervisor Øyunn Hestetun. Thank you both, for your patience, interesting conversations, helpful insights, feedback and support. This project would not have been the same without the two of you. Thank you Hanne Svanholm Misje for all help with practical information.

Thank you, Alice, Silje, Ingrid, Maja, Nikoline, and my sister Ingvild for providing me with the absolute best support all this time: you have backed me up, encouraged me, read drafts, given me constructive feedback and fuelled my motivation. Thank you, my parents, Åse Gunn and Svein, for your infinite love and support, for innumerable free dinners, company and words of encouragement. Last, but not least, thank you TJ for helping me set a date and pushing me to complete my (seemingly never-ending) project.

To sum up, all of you are irreplaceable to me and you have given me everything I have needed to be able to get to the finish line. However much overdue the completeness of this thesis is, I have never given up on it, and all of you have helped me in every imaginable way. As the saying goes: better late than never.

In forever loving memory of

Øyunn Hestetun

Benedicte Kogstad and her daughter Thea

Ruth Songedal, beloved grandmother

Vegårshei, October 2020

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Introduction

First published by Viking in 2002, Sue Monk Kidd's novel *The Secret Life of Bees* became an immediate bestselling hit. The novel, which follows a white teenage girl's development in the midst of the civil rights era, has sold a staggering six million copies in the USA alone – eight million including the rest of the world – and has been translated to thirty-six languages.¹ It was on the New York Times Bestseller list for one hundred weeks (two and a half years), won the American Booksellers Association's Book Sense Paperback of the Year award in 2004, was produced for theatre for over a decade, and was adapted to film in 2008 by Fox Searchlight directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood (Kidd "About"). The novel started as a short story – published in 1993 – but rested while Kidd wrote books of non-fiction. She started the process of converting the story into a novel in 1998 and it took her over three years to complete (Dutcher 24). Today, it is widely taught – with various course adaptations – in middle schools, high schools, colleges and universities in the USA (Grobman 11, Kidd "About").²

Because of the number of copies sold and the extensive use of the novel in studies, it has a certain cultural capital, although it is a so-called popular novel – a contemporary commercial novel. Its critical reception has been almost exclusively positive by both the public reader and literary critics: "With imagination as lush and colorful as the American South, a clutch of deliciously eccentric characters, and vivid prose, Sue Monk Kidd creates a rich, maternal haven in a harsh world" (Schwarz). Anne Rivers Siddons emphasises the aspects of healing and the sacred: "This is the story of a young girl's journey toward healing, and of finding, at its end, not only wholeness, but the intrinsic sacredness of living in the world. I think it is simply wonderful." Kidd, a white author, has been commended for her

¹ Hereafter, subsequent references to the novel will be *Bees*.

² A web search will also show lesson plans for teachers, high school courses, and multiple study and reading group guides.

skills with language, her approach to the feminine spiritual – which provides a feminine image of God, and the inclusion of and portrayal of African American characters.

On the face of it, *Bees* is in many ways an easy and unproblematic novel that should be, and is, celebrated for including an overwhelming number of black Americans in the plot and for having an overarching focus on love, healing, and feminism. On the other hand, although the majority of the reviews of and articles about the novel have focused on its positive sides, some have voiced concerns. Among them is Laurie Grobman who argues that the text's "use of black characters, literature, and culture [...] amounts to cultural theft" (10). In addition, as I will argue, Sue Monk Kidd has capitalised on African American culture and history by using these as background and props, and by adjusting and "recycling" familiar portrayals of African American characters to make them easily absorbable and recognisable for consumer culture.

In this respect, the target culture may be the same as the target audience of the novel. The novel's perceived readership – its consumers – are primarily white adolescents and adults, mainly girls and women. Naturally, this assumption comes with exceptions. However, it would be reasonable to presume that people like to read about characters with which they can identify and about a topic in which they have an interest. This perceived readership is important to keep in mind because my analysis assumes that white girls and women are the obvious main target for the novel.

Bees has often been referred to as Lily's coming-of-age story. She runs away from home at the peach farm and her abusive and unloving father, Terence Ray, together with their housekeeper, Rosaleen. In her search for truth, she stumbles upon a community of self-reliant black women who worship a Black Goddess in their parlour. The novel shows a sisterhood of black women from the inside through the narrator-protagonist's eyes. The main characters live in a close-knit community consisting of the three Boatwright sisters: August, June and

May. They live in a bright pink house on the outskirts of Tiburon. As a colour stereotypically associated with the feminine, pink underlines the feminine and feminist agenda of the novel alongside the largely female list of characters. The eldest, August, previously a housekeeper to Lily's mother's family, is the leader of the household, and a trained teacher. She taught for six years in Richmond, where her father worked as a dentist: "Our father was the only colored dentist in Richmond and he'd seen more than his share of unfairness" (*Bees* 119). Jane is the middle sister and a trained teacher. She is involved with civil rights and politics and is an excellent cellist. Neil, who is the principal of the school where she works, wants to marry her, but she is hard to get due to being stood up at the altar ten years earlier. May is the youngest sister and the most sensitive one. She had a twin sister once who took her own life: "By the time she was thirteen, she was having terrible depressions, and of course the whole time, whatever she was feeling, May was feeling. And then when April was fifteen, she took our father's shotgun and killed herself" (119). After her sister's suicide, May became even more sensitive to the injustices in the world; she has regular break-downs and feels all the things that are broken in the world as if they happen to her personally, "it was like the world itself became May's twin sister" (120). She uses a wall she has made herself with stones in order to get through the days. May writes notes and sticks them into the wall. The wall is similar to the Wailing Wall that Jews use in Jerusalem, "to mourn [...] and] to deal with their suffering" (120). However, eventually, the troubles of the world become too much for her and she too commits suicide by drowning herself in a shallow river near the house, leaving a note saying sorry and "*I'm tired of carrying around the weight of the world*" (261).

As a part of Lily's process, the women are crucial; they nurture her in a way that her father has been unable to or unwilling to do. These women and their community – the kindness and life lessons they offer, the Black Madonna in their midst and the cult surrounding her – are all important to Lily in her process of healing and learning to

understand who she is. Lily says about the Mary figure that “She is a muscle of love, this Mary” and “I feel her in unexpected moments, her Assumption into heaven happening in places inside me” (374). The changing times of the Civil Rights era adds additional emphasis to Lily’s personal process of change from learned racist attitudes to embracing a community of black women.

‘Most people don’t have any idea about all the complicated life going on inside a hive. Bees have a secret life we don’t know anything about.’

I loved the idea of bees having a secret life, just like the one I was living.

‘What other secrets have they got?’ I wanted to know.

‘Well, for instance, every bee has its role to play.’

(The Secret Life of Bees 184-85)

Each chapter in the novel starts with an epigraph about bees. The epigraphs show author intrusion in a novel that is otherwise seemingly the sole product of the narrator-protagonist. They also allude to Lily’s inner state of mind, a relation between Lily’s lack of knowledge of the lives of women in general, and her ignorance of the lives of African American women in particular. In addition to the bees being the main topic in the epigraphs, they are also present in the text throughout the novel, from the very beginning until the end. In the above quote, Lily visits the beehives with August and starts to learn more about them. The complicated, secret life of bees inside a hive speaks to Lily and she compares their lives with her own inner workings, and the secret she carries and actively hides from the Boatwright sisters. The bees weave together the action with the characters in the story and provide added symbolism to events related to life, death and the divine. The Boatwright sisters’ household is comparable to that of the hive: each of the sisters has her own role to play in the story.

Together with their immediate community, the sisters form the Sisters of Mary who worship the Black Madonna figure and participate in other rituals and ceremonies. Lily observes and takes part in their everyday joys and difficulties. They are warm, welcoming

women, who readily accept Lily and Rosaleen Daise into their household. August provides for her family with her honey production that is possible because of the property she has inherited. In many ways, the Boatwright sisters are privileged in that they do not have to struggle economically, although they live frugal lives.

Their economic freedom also allows them to welcome and help others who need it, such as Rosaleen and Lily, who are not so fortunate economically. The only one of the three sisters who keeps her distance and is sceptical of the new arrivals is June. She has some difficulties with her acceptance of Lily because she reminds her of August's past as a housekeeper and a nanny, a past she finds degrading for the intelligent and educated August: one that she would rather forget than repeat. In a sense, remnants from August's past knocked on the door when Lily showed up on her doorsteps: she saw the child in front of her, took one look at her and "all [she] could see was Deborah [...]" (*Bees* 292).

The novel's plot revolves around the 14-year-old white narrator-protagonist, Lily, who is in search of the truth about her mother's tragic death and, by extension, about herself. Eventually, she realises that it is a mother's love, care, and attention that she craves. The story is written in a first-person perspective and in retrospect. It is a story about the past, where events have been selected to fit a certain version of truth – Lily's truth – which in turn underlines the first-person view of events. Paired with the fact that there is foreshadowing throughout the novel, the retrospective perspective is evident both because of the use of the past tense and because it is spelled out at the very end of the novel when Lily says, "I sit in my new room and write everything down" (373). The perspective becomes all the more evident at the end, which moreover melts together the story's theme of her search and her need of a mother – because now the narrator-protagonist has several: "This is the moment I remember clearest of all – how I stood in the driveway looking back at them. I remember the sight of them standing there waiting. All these women, all this love, waiting" (371). She refers

to the moment when her father has left her and she is left to live with the sisters for the unforeseeable future. At the very end of the text, she refers to the women as “the moons shining over me” (374) – she has found the mothers for which she was searching.

Bees has historical and geographical ties to the American South. The plot is set to Tiburon, South Carolina, in the summer of 1964. The 1960s was a time of important historical events and turmoil when discriminatory laws ruled and determined the social hierarchy, especially in the Southern states. The passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, leading up to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, marked two important changes in legislation. The two laws were victorious events, crucial and life-changing for African Americans and other marginalised groups because they meant that segregation based on appearance was no longer legal. However, legislation in itself cannot prevent prejudice, be it in thought, utterances or actions. It takes time before laws are accepted by the general population and before the laws are able to impact ways of thinking, something the novel exposes through its depictions of life in Tiburon and Sylvan.

Along with the issues of race and the Civil Rights Movement, the novel engages in a dialogue with New Age, feminism, and feminist spirituality as the use of the black Virgin Mary figure and symbols such as the moon, trees, and bees emphasise.³ In addition, the novel stages an apparent feminist spirituality project – with the Black Mary figure and August at its centre – that relies on Lily’s quest to find out the truth about her mother and, in turn, recover from the guilt she is troubled with because of her knowledge that she caused her mother’s death.⁴

³ In the novel, race is used as a cultural, social and religious issue. Race becomes a positive category in the Mary figure, whereas elsewhere, Lily’s racist attitude shows that race is a belief system that she has been socialised into.

⁴ The apparent feminist spirituality project that is staged in the novel attempts to apply a political form of feminism. However, what the novel achieves is to overly emphasise the feminine side of a black and white gender dichotomy with its use of symbols and symbolisms, in addition to the largely female character list. Kidd might be aiming for a feminist spirituality project, but the manner in which the feminist aspect has been applied in the novel, it is simply abiding by traditional structures only turning them around. Thus, in the novel, there is a tension between spirituality and intellect, culture and nature, and in addition, symbols such as the moon and the

There are similarities between the author's coming-of-age and the narrator-protagonist's: they both grew up in the same period of time, had bees living in the walls of bedrooms, and had a black nanny (Kidd "The Secret Life of Bees – Reading Group Guide."). However, this is where the similarities end, as far as family likenesses are concerned. Kidd did not grow up in a dysfunctional family, like Lily, to make her want to escape her life, but she has had an awakening as an adult as to what it means to live in a patriarchal, gendered and racialized world because of self-experienced and observed sexism, feminism, and growing up during the civil rights period. All of which prompted her to break with her church when she had reached well into adulthood and subsequently write a memoir that describes her journey in *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter – A Woman's Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine* (1996).⁵

The fact that Kidd has written both on contemplative spirituality in *When the Heart Waits* (1990) and about her journey from traditional Christianity to the Feminine Divine in *Dissident Daughter* may explain her continued interest in religious and feminist ideas, which has seeped into her fictional novel of 2002 as well (Schlumpf 30). In Kidd's own words, "if you write your most authentic story [*Bees*] – what you are put here to tell – it does weave together your own experiences and ideas. [...] it is going to reflect my own spiritual orientation and view" (30). In *Dissident Daughter*, Kidd describes and explains her path away from traditional Christianity through contemplative spirituality towards feminist spirituality. She was raised a Southern Baptist, but she felt drawn to feminine spiritual forces, especially the Feminine Divine. She was also drawn to that which was excluded, subdued, or not given attention to in the church and local community where she grew up. Kidd's memoir, *Dissident*

sun are juxtaposed. For example, Terrence Ray's last name – Ray – is associable with the sun, whereas the mothers are referred to as the "moons" (*Bees* 374). Kidd refers to feminine spirituality (*The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* 1), but clearly draws on the qualities and the content of feminist spirituality, which is the term used by critics.

⁵Hereafter, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* will be referred to as *Dissident Daughter*.

Daughter, guides the reader through her spiritual and feminist awakening, her coming-of-age journey as it were. Interestingly, in her introduction to the memoir, Kidd puts emphasis on how the collision “with the patriarchy within my culture, my church, my faith tradition, my marriage, and also within myself” made her begin “to wake up to a whole new way of being a woman” (1). Kidd’s agenda with the memoir is to “open up some new avenues for experience and empowerment” (3). In her own words:

In these pages I’ve tried to tell you about the deep and immense journey a woman makes as she searches for and finds a feminine spirituality that affirms her life. It’s about the quest for the female soul, the missing Feminine Divine, and the wholeness women have lost within patriarchy. It’s also about the fear, anger, pain, questions, healing, transformation, bliss, power, and freedom that come with such journeys. (*Dissident Daughter* 1)

There is a link to be found between Kidd’s *Dissident Daughter* and *Bees* in the Feminine Divine and its role in the healing of women. Kidd argues that women have lost a sense of completeness within patriarchy, a wholeness that needs to be brought back through the process of a healing journey (*Dissident Daughter* 1). We can find a similar line of thinking in *Bees*, in Lily growing up within the patriarchal boundaries that her father sets for her. However, she manages to break free and find healing with the sisters and the divine in their midst.

Because of the novel’s focus on healing, finding the truth and contemplation on life, the text seemingly draws on the genres of self-help literature and New Age spirituality books. As Algis Valiunas in “The Science of Self-Help” points out, these popular genres have flooded the US literary market for decades now. Beginning as early as the 1930s, taking off in the 1990s, and gaining momentum up until now, the self-help novel includes subjects such as healing, positive psychology, positive thinking, finding happiness, holistic spirituality,

“finding the real you,” and a “love conquers all” philosophy (Valiunas). All of these subjects are, to some extent, represented in *Bees*.

Self-help literature often includes spiritual themes to help people reconnect with “life” and their “selves.” Similarly, I interpret New Age currents and trends as expressions of a wish for a different focus in life, a search for a *raison d’être*; thus, self-help books and feminist spirituality could be considered as part of New Age trends. Feminist spirituality is more specifically related to feminist-political concerns, thus through connecting with the feminine divine inside oneself women can realise their full potential as women. In addition, feminist spirituality often involves a break with patriarchy.

In *Bees*, Lily engages in a break with patriarchy when she decides to run away from home; when she reaches the Boatwright household she learns about the feminine divine. However, it is problematic that the novel’s portrayal of African American characters’ suffering and pain caused by racism and discrimination is juxtaposed to that of a white girl’s suffering under patriarchy and sexism. The text makes them somehow “shared victims of an ideology that demonises nature, the body, intuition, darkness and the female” (Eller 373). Therefore, they can bond as women, transgressing the oppressions under which they all suffer. This is a classic example of an inadequate and poor comparison between the intersectional points of being black and woman as opposed to being white and woman – burdened by patriarchy.

In this context, I will examine the statue of the Black Virgin Mary figure in the Boatwright sister’s parlour – the Black Madonna figure – as an image of the Feminine Divine, and the characters of August and Rosaleen – two black characters – who have had a mammy kind of relationship with both Lily’s late mother Deborah and Lily herself. The representation of the three figures will be examined to reveal the implicit ideas concerning perceptions of “the other.” The aim being to shed light on how representation might be problematic, and that

even if the representation tries to do justice and be a positive enforcement, it might still unwittingly do injustice, and end up as misrepresentation.

The above observations taken into consideration, Sue Monk Kidd took certain creative risks when she wrote *Bees* (Dutcher 21). There is an extensive use of African American characters in the plot; set in a period specifically important for the future lives of African Americans as citizens, and the inclusion of a Black Madonna figure – a female God – all of which are used to aid the white main protagonist in her healing and maturation process. When a white author represents Black Americans in such an extensive manner, the politics of representation and identity politics spring to mind. Does representation matter in literature? Are authors creatively free from political correctness in society at large?

Representation matters because it is important to see something that we can connect with, that reminds us of ourselves. If we see images we can relate to represented in films, media, politics, music, we come to believe that we have these possibilities in our own lives. In extension, some would argue that each construction in literature represents an experience of the world or an image of a certain place in time – in the real world. In *Bees*, several African Americans are represented, and this might be due to the author's interest in equality and race:

“I think it's part of my history. It is part of who I am,” she says. “I can't explain exactly why it lives within me for so long and passionately. But race matters to me, racial equality matters to me, as does gender. There is something about these kinds of social injustices that go to the deep of me.” (Neary)

However, in the novel, the representation of the African American women characters might be seen as influenced by stereotypical images of African Americans and as participating in the perpetuation of these skewed images. Therefore, the politics of representation also implies the power of representation.

Within the politics of representation lies identity politics, which is a complicated area that I will only mention briefly in this thesis. Who has the power to represent, and what does

it mean? Is everyone free to represent whomever he or she wishes? These are rhetorical but nonetheless important questions, which are not included in the scope of this thesis, as these angles of approach might be suitable for another study. The focus here will rather be to show how the Black Madonna and the African American characters are represented, and to include a view of cultural and racial appropriation.

In the United States, political correctness has become a mandatory aspect in social relations. Especially under the Obama administration's colour-blind politics and its focus on how to defeat racism, the awareness of the language used about minorities and how people are treated according to the colour of their skin or their cultural belonging has gathered momentum and spread to other countries as well. The discussion of appropriation and representation of race falls under the category of political correctness, identity politics, and, consequently, white privilege. Even though this polemic has a strong seat and an historical background in the US, it is not endemic to the North America; it has reached Northern Europe, as is evident in recent news in Norwegian media.

What is at the heart of this discussion is whether cultural appropriation should be considered as violation or simply as cultural exchange. In its most basic meaning, the term implies borrowing elements from other cultures and adopting them for personal or commercial use, which is, by many, not deemed a politically correct behaviour. Sometimes these borrowings border on, or are, illicit acquisitions, in other words a misappropriation. Although this phenomenon has probably existed as long as humankind, for many it is a new way of thinking about culture. In the US, issues of appropriation have been voiced since the eighties and closely link to the country's history of colonialism and slavery. In the words of Cuban-American artist, writer and feminist theorist, Coco Fusco:

“Appropriation,” a favorite buzzword of the 1980s art elite, isn't just about disinterested pastiche or training one's creative bloodlines to Marcel Duchamp or Andy Warhole; it is also about reckoning with a history of colonialist power relations

vis-à-vis non-Western cultures and peoples to contextualize certain forms of appropriation as symbolic violence. (66)

Appropriation as a method has been used in the study of art for decades and has later been associated with cultural appropriation and identity politics in literature. It is both fitting and accurate to describe certain forms of appropriation as symbolic violence as the often unintentional, yet disrespectful behaviour of stealing triggers a sense of powerlessness over the continual stereotyping, which, in addition, entails a sense of invisibility and lesser worth for the person in question. The transgression is not a physical injury, but a symbolic act of violence directed at people's culture and history. There is no blueprint answer to the debate about appropriation; therefore, it is both a controversial and a complicated term to work with.

The act of appropriation is both positive and natural, yet it is at the same time both negative and abusive. On the positive side, there is no doubt that, without appropriation, societies and cultures would not continue to evolve; cultures and people are dynamic entities and are always in a process of development. People are constantly, whether wittingly or unwittingly, looking for inspiration from others to use in their own lives in order to improve it. To borrow and learn from each other are necessities in order to move forward. However, on the negative side, borrowings are sometimes misguided and wrongful, especially when power relations are unequal, which is the perspective adopted in the context of this thesis.

One of the issues with cultural appropriation in the US today is that it has a clear link to the history of systematic violence, which dates back to the very beginnings of the nation: colonialism, slavery, and segregation. Although colonialism and chattel slavery on a grand scale have ended, prejudice and memories still linger. When linking the historical past and the present-day situation with the manner with which people appropriate, problems tend to arise. As an example, someone who borrows from another culture might be perceived as being creative; however, if a member of this "other" culture, or minority, uses the same cultural

element in the society at large, the white majority generally disapproves. An everyday example, which might seem easy to dismiss as a valid example from a colour-blind perspective, but which is crucially important for the people it concerns, is African American hairstyle. On the one hand, the Kardashian sisters are role models for many young girls and when they started to braid their hair in cornrows, the media praised them for being creative trendsetters. On the other hand, reality is different for women of colour. They might worry about whether or not it would risk their prospects at job interviews to wear their hair naturally, or in braids, rather than relaxed and pressed (Janin). Here, different sets of reactions to certain hairstyles shed light on unbalanced power relations.

Just as people in their everyday lives borrow from different cultures, hairstyles, clothing, and other cultural aspects, fiction, too, relies on inspiration and borrowing from history, works of literature, people's accounts of life and lived experiences, and religions. Inspiration exists everywhere. The novel as a genre presents fictional narratives and fictional characters that resemble and draw on authentic life. In these ways, the novel provides readers with stories that they can relate to, identify with, and learn from. Stories that allow them to compare the world in the story to the world they live in. The novel that this thesis discusses draws explicitly on history from an era defined by change.

Chapter 1 outlines some of the theory that lays the foundation for much of my analysis; it starts with New Age and its descriptions of a new approach to life and the divine, then traces that ideology in feminist politics in relation to feminine spirituality in *Bees*, and moves on to an analysis of the Black Mary figure and its guilt-cleansing force. Chapter 1 examines aspects of cultural appropriation of Native American culture and traditions in order to apply cultural appropriation to the Black Mary figure as it is portrayed in the novel. It is crucial to understand the workings of this type of appropriation because it serves as

background material for how racial appropriation applies to the representation of two selected African American characters in the novel in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 builds on the Black Mary figure's implications of racial guilt and works to uncover how Rosaleen and August function as supporting characters in the novel. It can be argued that the text reuses the old stereotype of African American mammy figures and their mothering of white children, which is problematic since the author is white, as is perhaps the majority of the readers of the novel. Also problematic is to imagine if the portrayal and the roles of these characters can be of help in a process of forgiveness and in mending broken relationships, if this is seen as one of the main themes in the novel. In general, stories have the ability to create and broadcast many voices that can have an impact on the reader's imagination and worldview. One of the purposes of the novel, as I read it, is to show how a story can nurture empathy, love, and understanding. However, the question arises as to if and how the novel with its implied agenda succeeds, or whether it can contribute to love and understanding between groups in society, when at the same time it repeats stereotypes, appropriates from cultural and racial heritage and traditions.

To sum up, the aim of this thesis is to examine the representations of the divine feminine and its two central characters in the novel and to critically reflect upon what these conceptualisations signify in general and in the maturation process of the narrator-protagonist, Lily, in particular. This approach to the novel is both complicated and questionable because the characters I analyse are African American and I am not only white; I am also not raised in the United States, which means I have no first-hand experience or background knowledge of the issues I examine other than from my studies and personal experiences. In addition, I inadvertently harbour white privilege and a lack of understanding of what it means to be portrayed and viewed through the white gaze. Yet, at the same time, I criticise Kidd for her portrayal and use of African American characters and for appropriating the feminine divine.

Simultaneously, my own ignorance is revealed through my analysis of the characters' representation. I only hope, and believe, that I have gained an insight into representational politics in this process and that I, too, have matured.

Chapter 1: New Age, Feminist Spirituality and the Implications of the Black Madonna Figure

Despite the protagonist's story of a broken and traumatised childhood, *Bees* has been celebrated for praising the healing power of love, for its involvement of strong women from a marginalised group in American society, and for providing an alternative image of God as divine Goddess. The novel's descriptions of healing, along with the strong emphasis on spirituality, community with other women, finding strength within oneself, and through the cult of the Goddess Virgin Mary, bring to mind ideas connected with New Age and feminist spirituality. Thus, it is tempting to say that Kidd has been influenced by popular New Age currents in American society.

New Age and feminist spirituality provide a significant portion of the background material I use for my analysis of the text. These theoretical insights offer an approach to the novel that sheds light on certain selected aspects, with specific attention to the implications of the black Mary statue situated in the Boatwright sisters' parlour. The further analysis will focus on the statue's name, appearance, and its central place in the healing process of the main protagonist and arguably, in extension, the American people as a whole.

An introduction to New Age and its key elements intends to shed light on how this worldview correlates with the foundations on which the novel is built and to point out some relevant ideas that have been adopted by feminist spirituality. The ideology and worldview of New age and feminist spirituality is similar to that found in the novel as exemplified by August's teachings and her fascination with the bees. Thus, the story draws on aspects from both movements. Feminist spirituality's key term – appropriation – will be applied in relation to the analysis as a whole since it is closely connected to representation. In addition, it is in many ways a controversial term, which in this context, bonds both New Age and feminist spirituality.

1.2 New Age

New Age can be said to be part of cultural trends or currents in the Western world. However, as both a concept and a phenomenon, New Age, is challenging to define. As Steven Sutcliffe, a scholar of contemporary religion, points out, there are difficulties with taxonomy, terminology, and identification of specific traits belonging to New Age (2003). The umbrella term “New Age” encompasses a vast range of largely undefined movements and western cultural trends. There are people who would refuse to be categorised as members of a New Age movement even if they could be considered as such due to common criteria of classification in religious studies. In addition, the identification of New Age as a religion, which is occasionally made, challenges the definitions of religion itself, as New Age and its followers often do not observe many of the common criteria of traditional, or even untraditional, religion. New Age movements have no higher power – a transcendent God – whom they worship, no sacred texts, no member count and no formal leaders.

In fact, as Steven Sutcliffe observes, even the existence of a “New Age Movement,” or the “consensus view that there is (or ever was) a viable social or religious ‘movement’ called ‘New Age,’” has been questioned (5). The existence of clearly defined religious New Age movements may be called into question, but it is difficult to deny the existence of social New Age currents and/or trends in US society. However, Sutcliffe is not alone in his criticism; other critics and scholars of New Age have also been critical of the definition of New Age as “a movement.” As David Spangler, a leading figure of New Age expresses, “I have personal doubts that there really is something called the ‘New Age Movement.’ The New Age idea, yes, but a movement, no” (qtd. in Sutcliffe and Gilhus 4). One of the only facts that scholars of new religions and spiritualities might agree upon is that there seem to be New Age religious trends and ideas present in American society.

Despite the debate as to whether New Age should be considered as a religious movement, “contemporary popular religion” (Sutcliffe 5), or quite simply a social trend, Brill published a *Handbook of New Age* in 2006. The handbook is evidence of the existence of New Age as a scholarly discipline, the existence of which James R. Lewis and Daren Kemp vouch for by referring to New Age scholarship in their introductory “Editors’ preface”:

Handbook of New Age is both a testament to the now securely-established growing academic consensus – as well as an indication of the vast breadth of disciplines on which newer students of New Age draw – from archival research to discipline of New Age scholarship – revisiting some of the well-known authorities and participant observation, from empirical psychology to Japanese studies. (vii)

In addition to referring to the agreement of a New Age scholarship as “securely-established,” Lewis and Kemp also explain that “New Age is usually understood as a contemporary social movement, rather than a national or ethnic religious tradition” (x). Similarly, Steven Sutcliffe indicates a general moving away from that which is established and acknowledged – traditional religion – when he argues that it “is better represented as an expression of contemporary Anglo-American ‘popular religion’” (5). At the same time, he questions the very existence of “a viable social or religious ‘movement’ called New Age” (5) and instead identifies “a series of social networks within which ‘New Age’ has undergone an episodic career” (8). As such, New Age is not a trend connected to any specific nationality or ethnicity, but rather a matter of individual choice, and a part of movements rather than religious traditions.

Regardless of Sutcliffe’s unwillingness to clearly define and give value to New Age as a philosophy of life that gives meaning to many people, it does not keep him from his adamant critique of scholars of New Age, such as Michael York, Paul Heelas, and Hans Sebald. These well-known researchers define New Age mainly by pointing out the absence of traditional categorising elements or markers that would normally help identify a religious

movement (Sutcliffe 10). As Sutcliffe points out, New Age movements have, according to Hans Sebald, “no tight structure or organization, definite leadership, or clearly promulgated doctrine” (qtd. in Sutcliffe 8). It is a paradox that the missing defining markers of religion are used as characteristics to prove that New Age movements exist. In my opinion, these characteristics are useful, but there are also other defining elements that could be used to describe the New Age movements, such as spirituality and appropriation. Even if I will not expand upon it extensively, it is useful to compare New Age to traditional religions and phenomena in order to understand the differences with greater ease when seen in relation to more established traditions of spirituality, such as can be found in the novel in relation to feminist spirituality and the feminine divine.

Comparing New Age to other religious/spiritual phenomena, a scholar of New Age and religion, Michael York, describes New Age as “a blend of pagan religions, Eastern philosophies, and occult-psychic phenomena” (363). He further claims that the “theological notions include the contention that human beings are essentially gods in themselves. Each individual is believed to contain a ‘God spark,’ a central fusion of divinity” (364). In line with York’s reasoning, the British sociologist and anthropologist, Paul Heelas sees New Age as “a highly optimistic, celebratory, utopian and spiritual form of humanism. [...]. God, the Goddess, the higher self, lies within, serving as the source of vitality, creativity, love, tranquility, wisdom, responsibility, [and] power” (28). The above characteristics of New Age define it as a conglomeration of certain chosen traits or ideas taken from traditional religions and philosophy. New Age adopts and adapts existing elements and melts them into a trend – a philosophy of life – to cater for people according to their individual needs. The appropriated elements aim to support the founding idea – the spiritual foundation – of the movement in question.

With regard to the question of characteristics that the different directions within New Age share, Michael York sees a need to find similarities between different movements, other than lack of leadership and doctrine. The similarities can be found in the “field of spirituality with which core New Age intersects and is generally identified” (364). He lists a number of common characteristics: “human beings are essentially gods in themselves; human beings undergo successive reincarnations; the human individual is responsible for creating his/her own reality; [and a] comprehension of the universe as a single interconnected field” (364). In addition, “Individual autonomy” and “authenticity” are two concepts that are widely accepted as key features of New Age (Hildegard Van Hove, qtd. in York 366). However, these two characteristics have been extensively criticised. As York explains, ultimate freedom does not come without cost, and it is the “very self-autonomy, based on what feels right to the individual that is most scorned by New Age critics – for ‘along with decision-making comes real responsibility’” (366). Many people who become interested in New Age-inspired movements are motivated by the idea of individual freedom. They may hope to regain a sense of self-value and self-worth based on a belief in an inherent “god spark” inside each person; self-empowerment may also become a result of this realisation. The method, or methods, applied to develop these feelings are at the same time both multifaceted and diffuse. Nonetheless, two of the overarching elements that are repeated are the use of appropriated elements and the value placed on spirituality. Spirituality on its own has led to the development of feminist spirituality, generally considered an individual category, but can also be seen as an embedded branch within New Age since it embodies many of the same characteristics and ideas as New Age but with a particular interest in women – hence “feminist” spirituality.

1.2.1 Appropriation

Appropriation connects *Bees* with New Age and the movement of feminist spirituality. The two movements seem to have influenced the novel and there are several examples to support this claim. In the main portion of the story, the action takes place in Tiburon, where an almost utopian atmosphere of harmony envelopes the Boatwright sisters' house, except for a few crises – a young boy's arrest and a tragic suicide – the harmony is unbroken. The sister's philosophy of life, which largely fluctuates around love, healing, empathy and self-empowerment, emphasises the novel's connection to feminist spirituality. This link is especially strong because of the number of women involved in the story, set up against the lack of male characters, and in the worship of the Goddess in their midst.

Another layer of the novel that also underscores the element of both appropriation and feminist spirituality is a creative choice of positioning the white main protagonist in the midst of an African American cast. It is a choice that seems to indicate that there is a message or a statement behind this careful selection because why else use one culture as stage for another. The culture that forms the background for Lily's healing is that of an African American family (of sisters) that, seemingly, have no extended family but good friends in the community. Thus, the Boatwright house and their extended property form a cultural bubble and a stage from within which the story can unfold. The cultural scene represents a set of experiences and worldviews borrowed from existing cultures, but most importantly, it is a fictional creation, one of which draws on life experiences, and is inspired by trends and views in US society. Trends and movements, such as feminist spirituality, can be perceived as if they spring out of New Age philosophies, and appropriation as one of the two movements' most defining element that maintains the movements' progression. In what follows I will examine the concept of appropriation since this term informs much of my understanding of the novel.

In its most basic sense, the term refers to the process of adopting or assuming a specific element for individual purposes, be it a particular hairstyle, traditional clothing, religious elements, etc. Appropriation implies a removal of elements from their original context, to use in a new setting, thereby stripping away their authentic and historic significance, and thus adding meaning that has not originally been intended. *The Meriam Webster Dictionary Online* defines the verb's infinitive form "to appropriate" in three different ways, all similar to each other and relevant to the use of the term by critics and scholars. Appropriation is "to take or use (something) especially in a way that is illegal, unfair, etc.;" "to take exclusive possession of" or "to take or make use of without authority or right." The Latin origin of the word further underscores the theft association since appropriation comes from the verb *appropriare*, which means 'to make one's own' (Richard A. Rogers 475). It is impossible to avoid appropriation when cultures and people meet, but there is a difference between "borrowing" and "making one's own." To borrow and learn from life wisdom and experience of others is an integral part of everyday life for all people, and it is one of the reasons how people have survived and learned from the beginning of time; "...appropriation and hybridity [are] constitutive of culture" (Rogers 478).

To steal, on the other hand, is complicated; it is often more problematic when it has to do with power hierarchies. Some might experience theft as less transgressive if a powerless subject, who has no significant influence in society, unlawfully takes something from someone in power. An adoption of customs, dress codes, hairstyles and ways of speaking etc., in order to integrate more seamlessly into a majority group from a "bottom – up" position, in an effort to move upward, is perhaps more accepted, and common, than the other way around. It almost immediately becomes troublesome when a person in a privileged position steals from someone in a disadvantaged or minority position. It is insulting and degrading for the

person or group of people that experience a misuse of their ideas, traditions, or culture.⁶ It is essential to keep in mind that merely being exposed to another culture does not equal appropriation: cultural appropriation involves action (Rogers 476). The active process inevitably involves agency and a conscious choice to “take” something which is not yours.

In Richard A. Rogers’ opinion, cultural appropriation is often “undertheorized” and in an effort to theorise it, he attempts to categorise acts of cultural appropriation in four separate but fluid groups: “exchange, dominance, exploitation, and transculturation” (474). These four categories make it easier to distinguish between different uses of appropriation in cultural settings and to distinguish between appropriation and misappropriation in the different “conditions (historical, social, political, cultural, and economic) under which acts of appropriation occur” (477). Transculturation is here intended to overlap the other three categories and, in a sense, transcend them by offering an understanding of cultural appropriation as to do with the nature of culture itself (474). It sees culture as built up by acts of appropriation and thereby makes it hard to separate any specific culture from another, only transcultural cultures exist – cultures mixed with other cultures. The category of transculturation “questions the validity of an essential model of distinct cultures” and underscores “appropriation and hybridity as constitutive of culture” (478). The hybrid nature of culture makes it a complex matter to separate appropriation from misappropriation in cases that are in a grey area. In addition, in the midst of the question of culture and appropriation’s role in the making of cultures lies essentialism. By working to uncover appropriation, it is easy to fall into the act of creating essentialist notions and as such unwittingly creating that which was the purpose of the critique to begin with.

⁶ Misuse in this setting is often subjective and difficult to define. However, to remove an element from its original context and alter it, add to it, give it additional implications, and use it for individual purposes may be experienced as invasive, depending on this particular element’s value in its original context.

Literature is in many ways both reflective of culture and a part of culture, thus also *Bees* engages in culture. R.A. Rogers' categories of appropriation are useful here because they can help shed light on how appropriation as a cultural phenomenon operates in the novel. Transculturation, exploitation and to a certain extent dominance are the categories that are useful for the scope and aim of this thesis. The first category called exploitation is about borrowing elements without giving back, especially when done by someone from a more dominant culture towards a subordinate culture (477). Dominance is when a "dominant culture is imposed onto a subordinated culture," and the members of the subordinated culture appropriate from the dominant culture, often in a colonial period or setting (480). Dominance is not completely redundant in the novel's setting, although the time aspect is wrong, since colonialism, chattel slavery and their consequences were present in the South's 60s. The same can be said about society today, the consequences are visible through racism in general and institutional racism in particular.

Since the above categories aim to describe issues that have to do with authentic cultures, it might seem a bit forced to impose them on a piece of literature, even if literature may reflect upon authentic cultures. However, it is important to keep in mind that literature may have an effect on culture just as culture may influence and inspire literary works. In the case of *Bees*, the novelist has used memories from her own childhood and the historical setting of the 1960s when she was a teenager and mixed the two with cultural issues of her present day (Schlumpf 29-30). The appropriation then comes in the form of two questions: how are the characters in the story presented and used, and how does this show appropriation? Herein lies the figure of the Black Madonna in the Boatwright sisters' parlour.

There are few sources available when it comes to appropriation of African American culture and traditions in works of fiction. On the other hand, Native American appropriations of living Native American culture, tradition and spiritual beliefs have been widely discussed

in the US and the UK. Therefore, the purpose here is to draw on Native American cultural appropriation to highlight how the appropriation done to these cultures can be transferrable to appropriation of African American history and cultures, here specifically linked to a work of fictional literature.

By taking part in native rituals, many women have professed a renewed balance in their lives, a sense of fulfilment, and a re-connectedness with their selves. Laura Donaldson discusses what she sees as misappropriation of Native American practices and traditions. She has written an article on what she refers to as “New Age Native Americanism,” acronymed NANA, which she considers a distinct subtrend of the more general trends of the New Age Movement (677). She describes NANA as “the misappropriation of American Indian traditions as alternative sources of knowledge and spirituality” (677). Donaldson refers to the appropriation of Native American traditions, such as clothing, songs, legends and names, by non-natives, which she judges to be not simple contact-appropriation but a “misappropriation” (677). Similarly, Michael York, goes as far as to calling the “spiritual appropriation of nativistic practice and belief [...] an erosion of ethnic dignity and identity” (368). Donaldson states that “NANA has emerged as a powerful catalyst for feminist transformation as non-Native women increasingly employ Indian traditions to escape the patriarchal biases of monotheistic religions and to become empowered, as well as individuated” (678). Further, she points out that: “[the] uneasy alliance between some strands of feminism and NANA has its roots not only in the proliferation of self-help strategies – that staple of American popular culture – but also in a conception of women’s development as individual and therapeutic rather than social and political” (678). Donaldson makes two important points here. First, she points out the eclectic manner in which some strands of feminism draw on religious traditions other than their own, to break free from “patriarchal biases.” This also shows how New Age has contributed to the developed of feminist spirituality. Second, she indicates that female

desire for empowerment raises “troubling issues,” ethical questions, in the case of appropriation from *living* religions and cultures (679).

Donaldson mentions two popular fictional novels which, in her opinion, use material from living cultures in order to empower women: *Jaguar Woman* (1985) by Lynn Andrews and *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (1992) by Clarissa Pinkola Estés. Donaldson notes that Andrews and Estés are much alike in the way they appropriate elements from Native traditions in their novels. More importantly, however, because they combine elements of “Nativism, Jungianism, and a therapeutic rhetoric of feminism” Andrews and Estés have “[...] exerted a powerful appeal and inspired many [...] female readers to do the same” (Donaldson 679). Because of the supposed positive and healing effect these novels have had on women especially, appropriation has at times become a legitimised manner of stealing – it serves a higher goal. As Donaldson points out, other women have also begun to use material from already existing cultures and traditions to create their own self-empowerment-mix in combination with ideas taken from feminism and spirituality.

Women have confessed that they have had their lives changed when they “recovered ‘the wild woman within’” (679). In Donaldson’s words, “the way both of these writers present themselves as advocates for women raises very troubling issues for the academic feminist community and, indeed, for all feminists committed to antiracist and anticolonialist work” (679). It is important to note that misappropriation is indeed a form of modern colonialization that somehow largely goes ignored or dismissed by many, especially when it comes to literature. It is much more common to read articles that discuss the cultural appropriation of hair and speech than literature that does the same. I agree with Donaldson that it is important not simply to “ignore or summarily dismiss [such novels] as pop culture not worthy of serious critique” because that would mean to let such “misappropriation of Native cultures and

skewed interpretations of feminism go unchallenged” (679). Thus, it is crucial for readers to remain critical of literary representations of religion and marginalised groups of people to avoid unnecessary perpetuation of stereotypes and misconceptions. In short, Donaldson criticises the way some feminists appropriate, or in her words “misappropriate,” Native cultures in the guise of an agenda of empowering women or helping them recover their “true selves.” She also stresses the importance of not letting these “popular novels” be left uncriticised and unquestioned. To be direct, I believe *Bees* is one of these novels that needs further examination.

On these grounds, Sue Monk Kidd’s novel stands to question as a novel that has not been properly analysed in the light of appropriation. NANA provides some of the theoretical background material needed to make sense of African American appropriation. Therefore, I argue that *Bees* represent appropriation of African American culture, history and ethnic stereotyping to serve an agenda specifically designed to cater to a healing process of white people’s racial guilt – thereby making the appropriation problematic. In an effort spiritually to heal the wounds of the white protagonist the novel’s other characters become a commodity – the novel itself becomes a commodity. Cultural exploitation is in Richard A. Rogers’s words when “[...] aspects of marginalised/colonized cultures are taken and used by a dominant/colonizing culture in such a way as to serve the interests of the dominant” where the “subordinated culture is treated as a resource to be [...] used for] consumption (Rogers 486). Spirituality plays an important part of the religious portrait in the novel, which in turn emphasises the feminist agenda of spiritual healing and community and in addition underscores borrowings from African American culture and a reinforcement of stereotypical views of African American spirituality.

1.2.2 Spirituality

Spirituality is an element present from the beginning of *Bees*. The opening scene begins with the main protagonist's reflections on Archangel Gabriel, Virgin Mary, God, and life after death (*Bees 2*). Religious spirituality and reflections on what is divine continue to be present throughout the course of the novel. However, not all spiritual reflections are tied to traditional religion. For instance, on many occasions they may seem to be related to an inherent power that women may hold by virtue of gender alone. In addition, the term is associated with how the text stresses the significance of connecting with a power – a force – both within and outside oneself, and a connectedness to something larger (cp. New Age). This in turn might create an atmosphere of confidence, calm, and understanding. Thus, it invites both individual and collective healing. To gain a better understanding of the term spirituality and the meaning I attribute to it, consider the following argument.

For many people, a traditional understanding of spirituality has to do with religion. It is based on an experience of that which is considered sacred: the Divine. However, according to Leland R. Kaiser, spirituality does not need to be connected to traditional religion or have anything to do with religion at all (6). Kaiser uses spirituality in his practice as a physician because, among other things, “it encourages patients to assume personal responsibility for themselves and their health” (13). Spirituality is for him “the relation between yourself and something larger [...which] means being in the right relationship to all that is. It is a stance of harmlessness toward all living beings and an understanding of their mutual interdependence” (6). Spirituality allows a link to be formed between an inner self and something outside of the personal sphere in order to expand a person's view and understanding of the world and how it functions. Psychologists Wanda K. Mohr and Allan Tasman explain this link between “yourself and something larger” in a more traditional manner as “a person's experience of, or a belief in, a power apart from his or her own existence” (53). In New Age movements,

however, spirituality lies somewhere in between these two approaches and comes to signify, in Robert Coles' words, "the search for meaning in life events and a yearning for connectedness to the universe" (qtd. in Mohr and Tasman 53).

Spirituality signals an effort to connect to a higher power, but this does not necessarily involve a 'traditional' transcendent God. Related to New Age and feminist spirituality this sense of spirituality is used to access something different or hidden within each person. The higher power is thus not outside the self but is an inner godlike and powerful self: the God-spark within, an immanent God. Through a process of self-cultivation, the aim is to become connected with everything and find eternal peace and wisdom, similar to ways of achieving nirvana/parinirvana and moksha in Buddhism and Hinduism respectively. To outsiders, this self-centeredness, and the signing out of traditional society may appear egocentric and narcissistic, which it often is. The ultimate goal of spirituality in a New Age relation is "to 'know' who you are and the knowledge of yourself understanding the highest spiritual qualities and attributes which are love, peace, purity and bliss" (Khanna and Yadav 29). The bottom line is that a cultivation of the self, or the ego, is needed to become happier and more satisfied with life in general, where the need to understand the deepest parts of the self is central. The notion that it is easier to help others after the self is healed is a central idea in New Age and stands in contrast to traditional religion such as Christianity where the opposite is used as the moral and ethical ideal: be good to others first and then good will come to you.⁷

Spirituality is often understood as one of the key elements of New Age and it plays a central part in the process of finding the divine within and connecting with the universe. Essential to all religions, spirituality gains specific significance outside organised religion, such as in New Age movements. Paul Heelas aptly defines New Age as "self-religion" (York 365), and the title of his book *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the*

⁷ From the Bible: "give and it will be given to you..." (Luke 6:38) and the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12, Luke 6:31).

Sacralization of Modernity (1996) indicates the primary focus of New Age movements: the self.

The self and the idea of the immanence of God are evidently important within the said movement. York is critical of Heelas for not explaining properly what he means by “self” and the way Heelas moves between descriptions of the self as “the ego of individual consciousness” and self as “the ‘Higher Self’” (365). According to New Age teachings, it is possible to achieve the “perfect life” if the “true self” is located within and connected with. The “perfect” or full life is available to all humans because “the person is, in essence, spiritual”; moreover, perfection lies in the fact that “to experience the ‘Self’ itself is to experience ‘God’, the ‘Goddess’, the ‘Source’, ‘Christ Consciousness’, the ‘inner child’, the ‘way of the heart’ [...] [and] ‘inner spirituality’” (19). It appears that nothing good can come out of something that has not started with the self: the self requires attention and needs to be fully healed before the person can successfully be able to help others. Seen from an outside perspective emphasis on the self – and the self’s godlike qualities – seems narcissistic, although the egocentrism may serve a wider purpose: to be in a position where one is able to be completely present and have capacity to provide others with suitable help. Shirley MacLaine says of New Age: “It all starts with self” (qtd. in Heelas 15).

This philosophy of life, which is important both in New Age and feminist spirituality, is reflected in the novel and especially visible in the aftermath of May’s suicide. After May dies, August does all that is expected of her as the household leader, she helps organise the burial and talks to the police. Then she retreats and grieves on her own in the woods to heal herself as much as she can before she returns to the rest of the family; only when she has done what is necessary to heal is she able to help the other members of her family again, including Lily and Rosaleen (*Bees* chapters 10-11).

1.3 Feminist Spirituality as a Source of Empowerment for Women

Feminist spirituality constitutes an independent “grassroots religious movement inside and outside established religions that reclaims the power, value and dignity of women” (Neu). The agendas within each feminist spirituality trend or movement vary greatly depending on the member’s needs and fields of interest based on each member’s individual experiences.

Feminist spirituality is one of the central ideologies that drives the action of the plot in the novel forward, mainly because of the connection between women and the divine goddess in general and the main protagonist and the Lady of Chains in particular.

The core areas of interest for feminist spirituality are women, women’s inherent goddess quality to access the innate divine power and become free of patriarchy in order to heal and finally become a true embodiment of oneself. This goddess idea or philosophy comes from New Age philosophies about an inherent God-power in all people and in all things in nature. According to scholars of New Age, the immanence of God or Goddess inside each human soul is one key feature of spirituality.⁸ As theologian Ragnar Skottene states, New Age can be characterised as unorganised, but still inspired by some dominating and prevalent ideas, such as the view of humans’ religious identity and innate possibilities (20). He further points out that the established view of God implies that God is simply not “out there,” in the transcendent reality, but rather that God is inside man’s inner being (20). The understanding of God or Goddess as immanent in humans suggests the sacredness and potential of greatness, ultimate freedom, and serenity in all humans.

According to New Age beliefs, if humans of contemporary society wish to find God, they need to look for him inside themselves (Skottene 20). As a famous New Age quote goes, “The only way out is the way in” (Skottene 20). Skottene refers to David Spangler who says that if the sacredness within is found then “there is no separation between the ‘inner’ and the

⁸ See in particular Paul Heelas (19, 28), but also Phillip C. Lucas (191), Michael York (364) and Ragnar Skottene (21-22, 34).

‘outer,’ between the microcosm within and the macrocosm of his environment” (qtd. in Skottene 21). According to Spangler, “we” can be integrated into a monistic, holistic and pantheistic reality because our real selves – thus the image of divine immanence in the human soul – are connected universally with everything, through the living spiritual energy in every living organism (Skottene 21). In New Age’s complex, and sometimes seemingly random, belief system or ideology, the individual can become one with everything: the universe, nature, and all other living beings. The living spiritual energy in every living plant and animal that the New Age adherent can connect with could also be seen as god’s presence. Hence, God is immanent in everything, and the individual can connect to everything, but only through the process of finding his or her own innate God.

The notions of the divine concerning the idea that God is immanent in all humans, women and men alike, and not a transcendent phenomenon, is central in most New Age teachings, but is also a feature in feminist spirituality. More specifically, it is the notion that the *Goddess*, rather than God, is immanent in every woman, which is central to feminist spirituality. The idea that Goddess is present within – the immanence of the goddess-spark – is vital for the novel’s main character’s self-empowerment, healing, and her coming-of-age story, as repeatedly emphasised by August’s teaching moments throughout the novel.

Aspects of empowerment are visible in the focus on women characters and female bonding but also in the appropriation of religious and cultural elements used to create a feminist sphere. There are chiefly four points that underscore the focus on empowerment of women. First, this is a novel by a woman about women. All the important characters are female, whereas the male characters are either peripheral or are described in negative terms, with the exception of a black teenage boy who works with August the summer that the novel recounts and a white adult lawyer. Therefore, the feminist agenda is transparent due to the text’s blatant focus on women, including the female Goddess who also happens to be black.

Thus, teamed together, the novel's women and their black Goddess highlight the feminist agenda of empowerment, especially for black women, according to Jennie S. Knight (67).

Second, Lily, the main protagonist and narrator of the novel, is in search of both an earthly and spiritual mother to gain balance and purpose in life. Third, the Boatwright sisters who take her into their fold are three black sisters who also house the statue of the Black Madonna. Their house is the place the sisters of the Black Mary meet to pay tribute to and gain power from the statue of the "Feminine Divine." The cult of the Black Mary in the novel has almost exclusively women adherents except for one man (Sugar-Girl's husband Otis Hill, who is a peripheral character). Even the house is painted in a stereotypical feminine colour: pink. Finally, the hobby and main income of the sister matriarch, August, is beekeeping, and the social structure of a beehive is a matriarchal society in miniature. All four points concern women and to a degree seek to empower and heal women, especially Lily, who is in sore need of a mother figure.

One of the strongest mother figures, with traits of the stereotypical "mammy-" figure in the novel, is August: matron or matriarch of the pink house in Tiburon. She is instrumental in explaining to Lily the need to find power within herself, through connecting with her own sacred feminine. She uses the traditional figure of the black Virgin Mary – in the novel named Our Lady of Chains – as a symbol of the divine mother and explains:

"Our Lady is not some magical being out there somewhere, like a fairy godmother. She's not the statue in the parlor. She's something *inside* of you. [...]
You have to find a mother inside yourself. We all do. Even if we already have a mother, we still have to find this part of ourselves inside." [...]
"You don't have to put your hand on Mary's heart to get strength and consolation and rescue, and all the other things we need in life," she said. "You can place it right here on your own heart. *Your own heart.*" (*Bees* 356-57)

In accordance with New Age teachings, the quote teaches how to learn to access empowerment from within and not be reliant on others to be strong instead. The example

shows how the text portrays feminist spirituality elements by emphasising the presence of the divine goddess, the mother, *inside* a person, as a force every person can access, because every woman is thought to have a goddess within. August makes Lily stay in the moment with her eyes closed and feel “for one clear instance what she [August] was talking about” while “Bees drummed their sound into the air” (*Bees* 358).

The bees provide an extra layer of symbolism that again creates an air of mysticism and power in the scene. The life within the beehive is mystical; it is dark, full of motherly nursing for the eggs, and full of healing honey. In addition, when a death occurs in the novel, bees are referred to by way of myths about the souls of the newly dead: “when a bee flies, a soul will rise” and “it means a person’s soul will be reborn into the next life if bees are abound” (*Bees* 256). Bees further emphasise the exclusive presence of “females” in the scene as part of a matriarchal society where male bees, themselves the product of unfertilized eggs, are only hatched when needed for reproduction purposes. In extension, this means that even if men are important, they are not needed or required to render a society functional. Women are in this respect the glue and the foundation that make up the constitutive parts of a society on both the micro and macro level, at home and in society. The novel emphasises that such a society is lead and maintained by women with little aid from men; men do not seem necessary for other than love and marriage. They are not needed in order to survive or to lead women: patriarchy is archaic. This again underlines the overt focus on women and women’s issues from a feminist perspective that the novel endorses. In addition, it seems that it is more than women’s break with patriarchy in question here, there is also an element of maturation present: the overcoming of racism and joining an all-embracing congregation of women that transcends race. And as with everything else in the novel, it all starts and ends with – what is perceived as the queen of women from a feminist spirituality point of view – Virgin Mary – the primary source of power, inspiration, healing and forgiveness.

1.4 The Implications of the Black Madonna Figure

The novel's re-imagining and adoption of the Virgin Mary statue combines original features from a traditional Christian and historical Virgin Mary. At the same time as relevant aspects of African American history (slavery's past events) can be detected, in addition to strands of feminism and spiritual feminism. The intention is to provide a new, improved and more powerful image of a well-known and much revered iconic symbol. I use "Black Madonna" as a generic term; in the novel several different inflections are used: Our Lady of Chains, Our Lady, Black Mary and Mother of Thousands, to mention some. A few questions about this goddess figure are discussed in the sections below. What do the Black Madonna's name, appearance and role say about her purpose in the novel? How is she represented? Which links can be unveiled between the statue and feminist spirituality?

The name of the Madonna figure in the novel, "Our Lady of Chains," gives indications of the statue's role in the story in general and more particularly in the Boatwright sisters' household and community. The possessive determiner "our" implies ownership, a sense of belonging to the speaker and the community where it has its place. Another indication of "our" is the assertion of hierarchical advantage it suggests towards the noun phrase "Lady of Chains": the statue belongs to someone: it is owned. However, it might also be an expression of endearment, and thus associated with inclusiveness and a close relationship with the speaker. Even though Lily participates in the day-to-day and weekly communal rituals, the "Our" does not initially include her in its inner circle – the other Daughters of Mary. The exclusion is especially clear after June disrupts Lily's participation in one of the rituals that involves touching the red heart on the statue's chest in front of the Daughters of Mary. Later, even if she does not intend to exclude Lily, August still maintains that "everybody needs a God that looks like them" (*Bees* 175). This implies that the black Mary is not there especially for Lily, but first and foremost present and important for the Daughters of Mary, who are

more similar in colour to the statue. Therefore, “our” initially signifies identification with and a sense of belonging of the Mary statue to the coloured community, to the Daughters at large, and more specifically, to the Boatwright sisters. Our Lady of Chains is a deity for coloured women; it has a background story that is recognisable because of its ties to slavery and because of its alleged power, ability and, will to break out of oppression. Further, it has abilities that have been attributed to black women: loving, caring, powerful, strong, and able to face adversity head on. However, these are stereotypical traits associated with black womanhood, but are also attributes that all women might want to have.

“Lady” is here both a reference to Virgin Mary and to the role ladyship implies. According to Christian beliefs, Mother of Jesus has a special and superior role in comparison to other women. She is often referred to as “Our Lady” in various Christian traditions in Europe, and her elevated status is highlighted with a capital L. The noun “lady” refers to “a woman of superior social position, refinement and gentle manners” (Merriam-Webster 3ab). It describes a woman of noble birth and class. The word is associated with politeness and formality. Virgin Mary came from a less than noble and rich family, but she has gained almost divine-like status as the Heavenly Mother of Jesus; thereby the designation “Lady.” The references made to Virgin Mary, both through the name of the statue in the parlour and her pictures on the honey jars thus connects Christian symbolisms and traditions with the fictional religion in the novel.

“Chains” implies difficulties, or bondage, something that is used to confine and restrain. In the novel, the image of chains is linked with the history of slavery through the narration of how Obadiah came upon the statue washed up on the riverbank – it is alluded to be a figurehead from a slave ship – and how it was subsequently used by slaves as a symbol of freedom. Seen together, the phrase “Lady of Chains” connects two mutually contradictory terms: elevation and degradation. Since the preposition “of” indicates a close connection

between "lady" and "chains," the Lady holds ownership over the chains; she has taken power over them. In this way, the image of chains, regardless of the historic connotations, no longer hold power to suppress; instead, the Lady is stronger than the chains.

This fictional deity is associated with the ideologies of both New Age and feminist spirituality because of how it is presented in the novel and how the characters in the story use and understand it. One of the links to appropriation is in how the traditional religious stories of Virgin Mary meet and merge with the fictional African American slavery myths in the text to create the story of how the statue originated. Another link to appropriation is the physical appearance of the statue. The descriptions of "Our Lady" are set up as contrast to descriptions usually used about the Virgin Mary in Christian mythology. Consider the following quote, which is the first description of the appearance of the goddess statue in the Boatwright sisters' parlour: "She was black as she could be, twisted like driftwood from being out in the weather, her face a map of all the storms and journeys she'd been through. Her right arm was raised, as if she was pointing the way, except her fingers were closed in a fist" (*Bees* 87).

The appearance of the statue is not like that of a traditional Mary statue. However, despite the features of the Black Mary statue in the parlour, Lily had no difficulty in recognising her as Virgin Mary. "Even though she wasn't dressed up like Mary and didn't resemble the picture on the honey jar, I knew that's who she was" (87). Both Marys are heavily invested with meaning. The traditional Catholic imagery of Virgin Mary is drenched in two millennia of symbolism. Every minor detail has significance and meaning. The posture of the traditional downcast eyes, for example, may reflect the established religion's attitudes to women; the traditional Mary is devout, faithful, pure, a perfect mother and woman, and in comparison to her, all other women fall short, some might think. She too has many names; she is called Lady of Sorrow, Queen of Mercy, Queen of Peace, Holy Mother of God and Virgin of Virgins (Florent E. Franke). Her posture, as shown in icons and statues, is calm, often with

the child in her arms, a red heart or a white lily painted on her chest, and sometimes with a hand lifted slightly and a finger pointing to the heavens or simply with folded hands. Her hair is also covered respectfully and modestly with a shawl.

In contrast, the statue of Our Lady of Chains has a direct and strong gaze. One of her arms is raised and the fist is clenched. The raised fist is a universal symbol of solidarity, power, and resistance. It is also a specific symbol associated with the Black Panther movement during the Civil Rights struggle for equality, thus a symbol of black unity and power. Today, the clenched fist is associated with the Black Lives Matter movement. The introduction of the fist in the novel is a definite symbol of empowerment and unity, especially for black women. The red heart is painted on the statue's chest but its colour is faded because it is repeatedly touched, indicating that many of the statue's immediate circle of worshipers have been in desperate need of help, comfort, and support for many years. It may also imply that its empowerment works since the worshippers make use of every opportunity to caress the heart to gain both power and strength, but it may also serve as a reminder to look for the same power in themselves.

Instead of being revered and honoured for being the mother of Jesus, the Lady of Chains is much more a source of strength for the characters. The Lady possesses a different set of qualities in addition to being a symbolic mother that may do more to inspire women's sense of self-value than the Catholic Virgin Mary. The Lady in the novel is the symbolic "mother of thousands" (*Bees* 204), and is therefore a clear invitation to women who are either religious or part of a culture that embraces the goddess as mother, to search for the same qualities of nurturing love in themselves.

The empowerment seems to pertain mostly to women of colour since the reference is made to the colour of the statue. According to Monique Scheer, the history of how people have placed value on Virgin Mary's colour tells a different story. In statues and iconography,

Virgin Mary is portrayed as having a wide range of different skin tones. Scheer argues that the skin tone of the statues or icons of Mary has been perceived differently and has had different symbolic values attributed to it over time. Her research shows that it is likely that dark skin tone had greater value before the eighteenth century because it was regarded as a symbol of authenticity and age, and not necessarily considered to show ethnic belonging (Scheer 1420, 1434). Perceptions of the black Madonna changed when scientists developed theories of race. Most notably, theories developed in the 1770s lead to “a more deeply essentialist notion of race-as-color” (1437). Where formerly the blackness was seen as a sign of authenticity and divinity, blackness was now understood as race. Due to an aspect of inferiority ascribed to some races, the black Madonna figures successively also lost importance and value for some people. In *Bees*, Kidd at the same time takes back into use an originally darker skinned Virgin Mary and gives the statue a personal background specifically linked to African American history as the presumed figurehead of a slave ship and a symbol of freedom for the enslaved.

The descriptions of the statue’s appearance and posture in the quote above is easily associable to African American history. Its face is referred to as a map, which traces its history back to slavery, to a stormy history of violence and struggles, whereas the torso’s position – the straight back, fist strongly raised and head lifted upward – shows a pose that implies the opposite of submissive, obedient and meek behaviour and instead implies strength, agency and resistance. Therefore, the role and purpose of the statue in the novel, is to empower the characters in the story but also to inspire change in women readers who may or may not use the novel as a self-help procedure to search for and discover an inner divinity in themselves and heal from effects produced by patriarchy. Another feature of the agenda of empowerment and healing that the novel highlights is the “healing ritual.”

1.4.1 The Healing Ritual

Our Lady was covered in hands, every shade of brown and black, going in their own directions, but then the strangest thing started happening. Gradually all our hands fell into the same movement, sliding up and down the statue in long, slow strokes, then changing to sideways motion, like a flock of birds that shifts direction in the sky at the same moment, and you're left wondering who gave the order. (*Bees* 335)

The healing honey ritual takes place once a year, every August 15th, on the Catholic Feast of St. Mary. In order to “preserve her for another year,” the Daughters of Mary bathe the statue in honey to celebrate the assumption of Mary (*Bees* 334). In a basic, straightforward sense, the honey ritual is a symbolic act that aims to heal, cleanse, and strengthen the physical appearance of the statue for another year, but also to produce the same effect on its participants: “[...] we're preserving her for another year, at least in our hearths we are doing that” (334).

In preservation, there is a certain aspect of care and love for that which is worked on in order to keep it from deterioration. The use of honey is highly relevant for this specific healing ritual as honey is often used as medicine because of its antibacterial properties – an anti-infection agent. The description of all the colours of the hands mixing and moving in synchronism, “like a flock of birds,” gives an indication that healing in this situation extends to a reparation of hurts between races, to mend the wounds caused by racism, violence, subjugation and dehumanisation from the past and present days.

I call it the “Healing Ritual” because honey both cleanses, preserves, and waves off bacteria and infection – thus show healing properties and an ability to keep something and someone healthy – honey heals. The ritual symbolises an individual and a collective healing on at least two levels. For Lily, on a micro level, the Mary-cleanser left her with a sense of a fresh start “We were preserving Our Lady, and I was content – for the first time since I'd learned about my mother – to be doing what I was doing” (*Bees* 336). Her healing process involves a

realisation that there is power in female community, that Mary is a stand-in mother to her, that a divine, feminine power rests within her and the Boatwright sisters, and that all the Daughters of Mary will act as her extended family (*Bees* ch.13-14). There is a sense of a new beginning and an awakening in the ritual: “We’re celebrating how she woke from her sleep and rose into heaven. And we’re here to remember the story of Our Lady of Chains, to remind ourselves that those chains could never keep her down. Our Lady broke free of them every time” (*Bees* 332). The awakening for Lily means that she is capable of completing her healing process when she confronts her father at the very end of the novel, because he is also part of her wound, she is strong enough to confront and ask her father the direct question: “Did I do it?” (*Bees* 370).

A similar claim can be made with regard to the healing of the Boatwright sisters and the Daughters of Mary after May’s suicide. When May takes her own life, the sisters lose one of their own, a character who embodied compassion and love for others – black souls in particular. In some respects, with May’s death, a part of their heart dies too. The healing ritual that they take part in soothes and strengthens them, thus underscores the strength in having a community of support and love.

On a macro level, there is a healing of racial biases in the ritual in which all colours and shades of brown are projected onto the statue. While all the hands are of individual colours, these are melted together in a joint rub that erases race – leaving gender as a category that unites them all. This is in my view one of Kidd’s agendas with the novel: the coming together of all women in celebration of female power. However, a problem arise when one considers for whom this applies. It does not necessarily apply for the participants in the ritual, who are all black, but rather for Lily and the implied reader of the novel -- white women. In addition, the element of the spiritual is significant; the statue is a symbol of the divine goddess

both in the flesh and within each woman, and the allusion to a higher power at the end of the quote points in the direction of a God or Goddess.

Our Lady of Chains is in many ways a result of a creative process that has joined one culture's history with another religious tradition by way of feminist spirituality. The appropriation of Catholicism, or Christianity at large, and fictional African storytelling and myths merge in the statue. Feminist spirituality emphasises the divine in women, and according to Jennie S. Knight, *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Secret Life of Bees* are two novels that became blockbusters on the literary market mainly because they offered something new: "myths of the divine as feminine within a Christian symbol system" (56). Another reason that these novels are widely popular for women is because they emphasise and show female divinity in new ways that make the experience of reading the novels empowering for women.

Worship of a black female deity by white women is in many ways controversial as it may often involve cultural appropriation. Evidential of this is the slow and often painful process of incorporating some of these goddesses into feminist spirituality because of questionable motives and accusations of racism and appropriation (Eller 367). Despite the controversies that the use of a black goddess may stir up, the general intent is to understand how white women understand their worship "of the Dark Mother in explicitly anti-racist terms" (Eller 367). However, the primary challenge in linking the Black Madonna worship with a movement like feminist spirituality rests on the fact that that movement largely consists of white women.

In the novel, there is only one white protagonist taking part in the cleansing and preserving ritual while the other characters are African American. This may be seen as positive in some respects, but it is also one of the problematic traits of the story specifically because it is viewed by most as positive. As Richard A. Rogers explains, "cultural exploitation include appropriative acts that appear to indicate acceptance or positive

evaluation of a colonized culture by a colonizing culture but which nevertheless function to establish and reinforce the dominance of the colonizing culture [...] (486). Along the same lines of thinking, the use of the Madonna figure becomes problematic because it is a conglomeration of African American history of slavery, the stereotype of the strong black woman and African American strong beliefs and spirituality summed up in an inanimate statue.

The feminist spirituality approach considers women to be agents of empowerment for other women. Goddesses play a special role as many women within feminist spirituality movements argue that it is important to have female images of God. It gives women a new, and more intimate, relation to a deity, which in turn gives them a greater sense of value. “Identification with the Goddess” provides feminist spiritualists with a sense of empowerment (Knight 66). The fact that “Our Lady of Chains” embodies colour and femininity may be said to have an especially empowering effect on black women (Knight 67). Especially goddesses, such as the Black Madonna, do not, from a feminist spiritualist point of view, “exist cross-culturally [...] but [are] constructed and utilised as a means of working through white racial guilt” (Eller 367).

Cynthia Eller has analysed feminist spirituality movements mainly at a national level, identifying its growing popularity and range in the US. She has documented the movement in a way that has not been done before and argues that:

Feminist spirituality is unique in its determination to remain true to the concerns of women, both politically and spiritually. And it is religiously innovative, always pushing beyond tradition, and often leaving it altogether in its search for spiritual resources that will prove powerful and transforming for women.” (*Living in the Lap of the Goddess* ix)

Eller subtly critiques feminist past and present movements and calls for a new wave of feminism, with more focus on spirituality and the divine than earlier. Since laws for the

regulation of equal rights between men and women have been instated, it is high time that the spiritual sphere be reformed, transformed, and adapted into something from which women can gain strength and find validation of their femininity and inherent “femaleness.” Feminist spirituality has no wish for equality between the sexes but sees women as the ultimate divine.

1.5 Conclusion

Cynthia Eller has written extensively on prehistoric matriarchs and goddesses both inside and outside feminist spirituality.⁹ In “White Women and the Dark Mother” (2000) she among other things describes spiritual feminists’ adoption of the dark goddess. As Eller argues, “It is one and the same theological mechanism that oppresses women and dark-skinned peoples” (371). Some feminists point to the fact that Virgin Mary has her divine powers and attributes mainly because of her status as mother of Jesus, thereby making her goddess status derivative, solely because of her divine son, which is why she is unworthy of worship for some feminists. Many women within New Age and feminist spirituality movements have therefore sought alternative images of the divine, a divine that is powerful in her own right.

In many ways, the Black Madonna of the novel reflects an idea of a new female deity, more suitable to modern feminist ideas of what it means, or should mean, to be Woman. The idea of women coming to terms with their own demons – particularly as in the case of the novel’s protagonist Lily, for example, through communion with other women – supports the idea of female power.

In contrast to the noticeable feminine presence in the story, there seems to be a need to move away from the masculine. Even when the masculine is present, as in Zach’s relationship

⁹ “Divine Objectification: The Representation of Goddesses and Women in Feminist Spirituality” (2000), “The Religious Use of the Prehistoric Imagery in Contemporary Goddess Spirituality” (2003), “White Women and the Dark Mother” (2000), *Gentlemen and Amazons: The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory, 1861–1900* (2011).

with Lily for example, it is more as a prop for her to use to explore her own sexuality. There is also a need to move away from the masculine image of god. The only way to embrace a traditional, Christian religion is to appropriate the existing image of God as white and male, as the pinnacle of white male privilege, and turn it into Goddess. The new image will be a Woman embodied in the figure of Black Madonna. As it turns out, however powerful the new Goddess is, she is still the result of appropriation. She is a mix of a white divine mother and a black woman, or perhaps an ancient Earth Mother. Our Lady of Chains is black and powerful because of her agency and her people's history, which her body posture, appearance, and name emphasise. She has healing powers and represents an embodiment of love and healing because of the once bright red heart painted on her chest. The statue is the epitome of a powerful and strong, black woman.

The novel's Christian religious tradition is a mixture of Christian traditions proper and dogmas blended with fictional stories from an historic past and present. It creates an interesting and complex picture of how a statue can both symbolise and participate in black women's struggle to be whole and overcome their difficulties without forgetting the past. It also creates stories that embrace and empower women instead of reinforcing a patriarchal power structure. This is a story about an alternative reality where God is Goddess and a woman -- black.

Chapter 2: Racial Appropriation and Representation of African American Characters

African American characters are overrepresented in Sue Monk Kidd's novel and thus invite attention for at least two reasons. On the one hand, they constitute a large portion of the background and are both foregrounded and visible because of their very presence, importance to, and influence on the narrator-protagonist's coming-of-age. On the other hand, their dark skin is consistently set in contrast to Lily's light skin, which makes her stand out, since light is more visible when surrounded by that which is dark, and vice versa if the situation had been reversed. Black characters, regardless of their presence, become secondary in relation to Lily's maturation process; they are used mainly for plot purposes and emotional support, and their characters are rendered as shallow, bordering on one-dimensional. However, keeping in mind that this is a coming-of-age novel, the difference in the staging of the character's relevance in the story is within the boundaries of the genre. Despite this fact, it is somewhat disturbing that the black characters are seemingly foregrounded but at the same time placed backstage as puppets. This chapter will make clear how these characters are invisible despite their racial visibility.¹⁰ Through an attempt at a seemingly nuanced portrayal of African American women and white girl, the novel can be read as an effort to bring women together across racial boundaries, and obliterate the boundaries that separate them, in order to promote female empowerment and communion as higher goals, paralleled with the agenda of healing and love. However, I find that despite the text's efforts, the representation of black women cannot mask the tension that lies in the dichotomy between black and white.

¹⁰ In her dissertation from 2014, Jade DáVon Petermon discuss "Hyper(in)visibility: Reading Race and Representation in the Neoliberal Era" in relation to film and media with a focus on Hollywood. She argues that "despite the fact that black bodies are present in films, on television and in new media spaces, black subjectivities are nowhere to be found" (viii). Her observations in the film industry correlates with my own findings in *Bees*. I find it useful to implement not her exact notion of invisibility, but to juxtapose visible and invisible to describe parts of what happens in Kidd's novel.

Therefore, the intention with this chapter is to explore the racial world of *Bees* where African American women are presented through the white gaze twice – through the narrator protagonist Lily and the author Sue Monk Kidd. In extension, an additional intention with the chapter at hand is to examine how the representation of race figures through racial appropriation – through a mix of white imagination and African American history, the African American characters are created and depicted – to produce a sense of female empowerment that also seeks to cross racial boundaries. I will argue that the portrayal and use of black characters perpetuate notions of race by demonstrating features thought to be essential and stereotypical of black American women. These characters are used as agents that are suitable for the purpose of the novel and may outwardly give an impression of being well-rounded characters. Therefore, the novel’s emphasis on women, female authority, and wisdom, alongside the mammy figure, mothering and the subversive mammy calls for examination in order to uncover if the characters’ representation truly gives the impression of well-roundedness.

‘Mothering’ and ‘mother’ is closely connected to feminist spirituality and feminist empowerment – that I see as a well-defined part of the novel’s agenda – through its focus on women’s innate goddess-nature, nurture and the giving of value to motherhood and empathy. The mammy figure and ‘mothering’ are two closely related aspects of what many associate with women in general and perhaps the black woman in particular. Accordingly, the novel operates with racially motivated stereotypes, which is a problematic aspect of the story, one of which the subversive mammy attempts to disrupt. The rest of the chapter’s emphasis lies on the character of Rosaleen – the family housekeeper and Lily’s “stand-in mother” or mammy (2) – but also considers the effects of August’s mothering on Lily’s journey and the result of the ‘subversive mammy’ on August’s representation. In extension, the representation of August and the community of sisters are connected to the bees, which are intertwined in the

story both in the text and in the epigraphs we find at the beginning of each chapter in the novel.

Two significant issues will be examined when it comes to racial appropriation and representation of race: racial attitudes and stereotypes. On the one hand, a short outline of racial attitudes in the American South in the sixties as portrayed in the novel is necessary since this is the historical setting of the novel. On the other hand, stereotypes and the mammy stereotype in particular, as well as power relations, and tensions between Lily and Rosaleen need to be analysed to shed light on the attitudes presented in the text. The latter deals with representations of race by way of looking at descriptions of Rosaleen's body, her behaviour, and her relation to Lily, which are in many ways juxtaposed to the portrayal of August, a polar opposite of Rosaleen in many respects. The main concepts addressed in this chapter are thus racial appropriation, agency and subjectivity with regard to how key black characters are represented in the novel.

2.1 On Racial Appropriation

Karlyn Crowley implicitly draws on ideas of "the Other" from both Lévinas and bell hooks when she explains that "racial appropriation is built on a complex set of popular practices related to essentialism and is often founded in longing for the Other" (9). For Crowley, racial appropriation is closely related to feminist spirituality.

In feminist spirituality, some white women adopt and appropriate what they believe to be original and authentic cultural features, often belonging to ethnic minorities, in order to feel more in tune with their roots and thereby to feel authenticated and empowered. The goal for many feminist spiritualists is to achieve a sense of shared identity with their fellow spiritualists through biological gender. The racial, cultural and religious adoptions are thus, in their opinion, an attempt to give recognition to the minorities from whose authentic culture

they borrow. However, a shared set of female experiences – here: discrimination caused by patriarchy and perceived gender inequalities – at the same time destabilises the “shared” experiences as it gives an incomplete image of the level of oppression that women of colour have undergone. European women have not been systematically enslaved and oppressed in America or been forced to forgo their religion in favour of Christianity. This incomplete image complicates power relations amongst women from different groups and makes it difficult to justify adoptions from ethnic minorities without their consent.

The ethical issues related to adoptions and appropriations do not escape Crowley’s attention either, as she brings up the problematic nature embedded in this process, exemplified by how some “white female New Age practitioners engage in colonizing acts of appropriation that are often shocking in their naïveté” (10). Borrowing costumes, traditions, and other items – authentically ethnic – from a group of people and using them outside of their traditional setting in order to feel more whole and real is truly problematic. At the same time, Crowley attempts to examine the concept of appropriation from a more positive perspective and questions its almost exclusively negative references by critics who argue without providing a nuanced analysis of the term as a cultural phenomenon (Crowley 9-10). As well as being keenly aware of the negative sides, Crowley sees that New Age racial appropriation also has positive features for those who participates, as it is a way for them – white women – to “obtain ‘gendered satisfaction’” (10). Because of long-term oppression, by patriarchy and religion, it is the “longing for the female power” that drives many women to appropriation because they find that “the authenticity of people of colour [and especially women of colour], offer[s] white women a better gender identity than public forms of feminism” (10).¹¹

¹¹ Power relations, history, and culture also play a part in this observation because, as Crowley points out, white privilege and “norms of universalism” have consequences in that they may cause a feeling of an “absence of specific ethnic/racial spiritual traditions” (9). In other words, many white women claim to lack authentic history or roots that connect them to their background. In order to feel better rooted, and grounded, they use elements from other cultures. They use them as props to feel better, without thinking about what kind of impact their appropriation has on the people from whose culture they borrow.

In many ways then, race and gender are viewed as inseparable but, at the same time, this specific interest in what is different from oneself also portrays “suspect racial fantasies” (18). Native American women and black women are by some white women perceived as exotic, mysterious, closer to nature, more original and authentic, and as more in touch with who they are and their historic roots. White women involved in New Age and feminist spiritualist practices may then perform rituals and/or adopt ways of being to be more like the “other” to feel more real and rooted in something they believe is original or natural, and more in touch with nature. Racial appropriation may then be seen as a merge with and an extension of cultural appropriation, because people borrow from a group of people’s culture and religion specifically because of their race. This further suggests an essentialist understanding of race, which in essence is racist because it divides people into categories based on appearance. For present purposes, racial appropriation is seen as part of cultural appropriation.

The above description of racial appropriation, as it is described in relation to Native Americans and authentic life, does not occur in Kidd’s novel because *Bees* is a work of fiction and not reality. Despite this, this particular notion of racial appropriation as described by Crowley is nonetheless important as a model of reference for the appropriation in the fictional world of the novel where the sense of “taking” exists on a narrative level. The novel is a result of creative choices by the author and the racial appropriation manifests itself in the author’s conscious use of African American characters for plot purposes and in how their portrayals draw on essentialist stereotypical features of race. The choice of placing black characters in a fictional setting where they play the role of support – to guide and help in the healing process of a white character – makes the act of using coloured characters complicit in what some would term a transgression. It reads as exploitation – and a continuation of colonialist thinking – of a specific group of people, because of an appearance and a historic background that aids a specific purpose in the text. Thus, it indicates a form of racial appropriation that

deviates from the standard, but that still lies within appropriation in that the form includes borrowing and taking from an authentic origin to use for a specific purpose in a new context. Specifically because African American characters are used in *Bees* due to their history, their culture, and stereotypes about them, these characters become mere “placeholders for symbolic value” and not, as what might have been intended with the novel: a visible celebration of African American diversity, survival and resourcefulness (Eller 372).¹²

In addition to the adjusted understanding of the term, I understand racial appropriation in this context as a response to a feeling of guilt, more explicitly white racial guilt. Cynthia Eller’s idea of white racial guilt is closely linked to feminist spirituality and the worship of a coloured divinity: or “Dark Mother”: “White spiritual feminists” may recognise and “suffer some guilt – stated or unstated – over their position at the top of the race hierarchy,” and their response to this guilt may be varied (373). Eller identifies various responses to the feeling of racial guilt: acts of racism – which state that racial hierarchy is organised as it should be; “self-flagellation” – self torment; “generational response” – my ancestors did it, not I; and an identification with the other – wherein the dominant party argues that s/he is “a victim of mistaken identity” (373).¹³ I suggest that racial appropriation may be a fifth response to the feeling of guilt Eller refers to, which connects to her previous four responses.

Eller’s notion of white racial guilt can be connected to the novel in at least two ways, both explicitly to the goddess figure as discussed in chapter 1, and by extension to the idea of racial appropriation in this chapter. For example, it seems that the characters’ colour and the

¹² Eller refers to how white spiritual feminists seem to place value on colour, especially when it comes to black deities and black women, which thereby makes individuals who identify themselves as black become “placeholders for symbolic value,” rather than individuals in their own right. Eller gives attention to one example in particular, which emphasises the symbolic value – rather than individual value – black women hold for white women, where some white women tell of dreams where they see a black woman whom they have interpreted to be “a visitation from the dark mother,” (327).

¹³ Rachel Dolezal is a white woman who controversially identifies herself as African American. She has expressed a belief in race as purely social construct, thereby justifying her choice to “become” African. She has changed her name after the heavy media attention directed at her.

historical time of the plot – the middle of the civil rights era – is set up to be used as a means to an end: a way of working through racial guilt. Arguably, there is a continuous feeling of guilt over slavery in American society today. The appropriation I see in the novel attempts to visibly portray proportionately more African American characters than white – to give space to them – in order to show from a seemingly inside perspective that African Americans have diverse personalities, interests, occupations and intelligences – that the Boatwright sisters are individuals in their own right. With this in mind, Lily’s story reads as a response to a feeling of guilt, and a working through of that guilt by way of both the maturation process that took place during a few formative summer months in a spiritual, feminist environment and the process of her writing everything down after the events.

In a larger perspective, Lily symbolically represents a “teenage America” – immature, narcissistic, and racist. This teenage (both Lily and “teenage America”) has an issue to work through – matricide. Figuratively speaking, matricide refers to the idea of “America” killing its origins. Some researchers suggest that humans originate from Africa. Thus, to take advantage of, abuse, and symbolically kill people of darker complexion may come to signify to kill one’s symbolic mother. Historically, North America killed many thousands of African people both on the slave ships and throughout slavery, and after. In the novel, this is exemplified through the text’s representation of African American characters through a white gaze: the characters are at the mercy of white representation, which is unable to render them truthfully and thus, in turn, kill their originality and authenticity. Because, represented through the white gaze, the black body is killed, it no longer exists but through white imagination. Arguably, then, the novel’s representation of African American characters does not do them justice, their representation is from the beginning flawed and a continuation of white abuse of “the other”.

2.2 The Representation of Rosaleen

2.2.1 Racial Politics

Set in the American South in the middle of the tumultuous era of the early 1960s, some of the passages in the novel directly address politics, which in turn sets in motion events that eventually lead Lily and Rosaleen to the Boatwright sisters' house where they are invited to stay. The first reference to politics, which also binds together issues related to black Americans and discrimination, comes at the point when Lily observes Rosaleen who is fascinated by a specific news report, which leads her to try to register to vote:

'Today, July second, 1964,' he said, 'the president of the United States signed the Civil Rights Act into law in the East Room of the White House...' [...]

I didn't know whether to be excited for her or worried. [...] When that minister from Alabama, Reverend Martin Luther King got arrested last month in Florida for wanting to eat in a restaurant, the men at church acted like the white people's team had won the pennant race. I knew they would not take this news lying down, not in one million years.

'Hallelujah, Jesus,' Rosaleen was saying over there on her stool. Oblivious. (25-26)

As can be detected here, there are several issues pertaining to historical events and race that require commenting. The word "oblivious" stands out as a powerful punctuation to the scene, as a one-word description of Rosaleen's mental state as she was viewed by the child. Lily implies that Rosaleen has a limited knowledge of the world of politics and does not see the consequences of the new legislation that some white men will try to undermine. Lily reveals learned racist attitudes in her views here; it seems that she regards herself as an outside observer of the scene unfolding before her and views Rosaleen from a top-down perspective. Rosaleen seems immersed in the events taking place on the TV-screen in front of her, ostensibly unable to grasp the complexities of the political situation. Therefore, Lily deems her to be unaware of the recent act of resistance by Martin Luther King and unaware of the repercussions and resistance the Civil Rights Act will be met with from white men and women: "they would not take this news lying down, not in a million years." From an outside

perspective, by referring to the political struggle for equal rights as “sports,” Lily reinforces the image of herself as a childish teenager when she creates a dichotomy between black and white. As she narrows down Rosaleen’s world to that of the TV and the stool on which she sits, “over there,” she objectifies the person in front of her and sees her as a type, as inferior, and racially different from herself – as an “other.”

Racial politics is present in the novel as the setting of the plot is placed in a period of transition to what might be called modern legislation. However, these crucial years for many African Americans seem underemphasised in favour of a focus on Lily’s personal development and process of maturation. This should be considered normal since it is a coming-of-age novel, and the criticism directed at the novel reveals as much. There is little criticism to find that concerns the representations of the supporting characters in the book. Sue Monk Kidd has been praised for writing a novel where she “avoids stereotypes,” as Jennie S. Knight puts it (69). According to Knight, all of the African American women in the novel are presented as “complex, full characters” (68). However, the ongoing political dilemmas that shape the social world the narrator-protagonist encounters are continually disrupted by Lily’s characteristically self-centred behaviour and herein lies one of the points of contention. The genre of the novel – coming-of-age – predicts that Lily is the centrepiece of the story and that everything revolves around her. The black characters influence her and, in many ways, help her grow and mature: she needs them in order to define herself. She draws on black suffering, pain, and history to feed her own reflections and growing empathy for these characters and herself.

The consequences that follow the TV-scene give the reader some notion of how the racial attitudes of the sixties were experienced by the narrator-protagonist through her presentation of Rosaleen’s experience of the voting-process as both dangerous and challenging. I would like to draw attention to three scenes the text emphasises in relation to

racial attitudes: Rosaleen's act of resistance in the face of racist men; police as passive bystander when she takes a second beating; and police as guardian of Lily's reputation. These three scenes affect Lily in different ways and move forward her process of reflection as much as they move forward the action of the novel.

In the first scene in question, the novel shows the girl and the woman entering from the "worst side of town" and unemployed white "men with too much time" (38), playing cards outside the Esso station. The men moved from the Esso station to the curb as Lily and Rosaleen approached, "like they were spectators at a parade and we were the prize float," and proceeded to comment on Rosaleen's colour, her physical size, and mockingly call her a "model citizen" (39). The stereotypical features the novelist uses here reflect an essentialist understanding of a correlation between low social class and low educational level, and between unemployment and idleness, frustration and anger, which might have spurred on the racist comments and behaviour. The members of the Esso-gang are surprised when, "Coming alongside the men, [... Rosaleen] lifted her snuff jug, which was filled with black spit, and calmly poured it across the tops of the men's shoes, moving her hand in little loops like she was writing her name – Rosaleen Daise – just the way she'd practiced" (39). The men attack her with "outright fury," but when the police arrive it is she who is arrested for "assault, theft, and disturbing the peace" (40-41).

This first episode of violence towards Rosaleen portrays Lily as a passive bystander. She is in no real danger and will not be in the course of the novel; the only people in danger are the coloured characters, they must be vigilant at all times and especially careful around white people. The repercussions of Rosaleen's actions are set up against the lack of consequences for Lily and the violent men. Rosaleen acts independently and against Lily's instructions: "'Keep walking,' I whispered. 'Don't pay any attention'" (*Bees* 39). Her pouring of the snuff juice can be seen as a show of agency, opposition, and resistance in the face of

racism, and as a disregard of the orders Lily had given her. Similarly, the text expresses Rosaleen's surge of newfound empowerment by the TV-news' proclamation of the voting legislation. African American men first got the right to vote in 1870 but were effectively stopped in the process by poll taxes, literacy tests and violence. 1965 was the first time African American women had the right to vote, which Rosaleen's excitement emphasises – she will not let herself be antagonized to not vote. The fact that Lily gives instructions indicates that she feels herself positioned above Rosaleen, which would allow her to give commands to an older woman who is also her caretaker. However, Rosaleen did not show subordination towards either Lily or the men, and instead asserted her position and right to be there. This act of agency showed itself to have severe consequences for her. The police's involvement in the scene invites little confidence towards public departments that ought to offer innocent people protection, although Lily blindly believes in the protection the law can give her. However, it is clear from the scene at the police station that the protection Lily relies on does not apply to Rosaleen as will become clearer still in the next scene at the police station.

In the second scene, the idle men from outside the Esso station, the Esso-gang lead by Franklin Posey – “the meanest nigger-hater in Sylvan” (47) – have followed them to the police station. As Rosaleen is handcuffed, Posey uses a flashlight to hit her in the forehead, proclaiming, “Maybe now you feel like apologizing” (45). Lily reacts instinctively with a scream but is in effect silenced by the male police officer who puts his hand over her mouth. Later, another police officer lets the men into Rosaleen's jail cell to make her apologise by force. Therefore, she ends up being beaten thrice for her so-called ‘insolence’ towards the men. Rosaleen, however, does not apologise and proves herself strong and true to her principles. At the same time as Rosaleen shows resistance and agency, stereotypes are at play in the way she is portrayed: the stereotype of the strong, big black woman who is highly

resistant to physical violence. As a comment on the presence of past perceptions in today's stereotypes, Jennie S. Knight states that, "slaveholders' attitudes [have] led to the stereotype of black women as 'superwomen,' with significantly greater physical strength and capacity to bear pain than white women" (68). The stereotypical uneducated southern man might view a big, strong woman as one who could endure physical retribution. The lawlessness that allows the violent and abusive situations like the confrontation between the Esso-gang, Rosaleen, and the police seems to be compressed into the fact that there is no mention of the men's charges for their physical violence towards a black woman. The conclusion is that the Esso-gang is in collaboration with the police or at least that the violence portrayed is common and not usually reacted to.

In the two scenes above – together called the voting-scene – Lily's presence is not commented upon nor addressed by the Esso-gang; she is invisible to them, an outsider who watches the situation unfold, unable and/or unwilling to act. The events have given her a glimpse of how brutal the real world can be. The lawlessness, violence, and hatred directed at Rosaleen move the action forward because Lily, as a passive and possibly shocked bystander, at a later stage recognises the injustice in the situation. Because she did not act when her nanny was beaten up the first time, and was silenced by the police the second time, when they return to the house, her by then pent up emotions make her act and she challenges her father on a topic on which he has kept his silence for years – the death of her mother. The disruption in this scene lies in Lily's reaction: Why does she go back to the topic that she herself is interested in instead of confronting her father on the social injustice and institutional racism she had just witnessed? Lily's behaviour is inconsiderate and self-centred. She sees injustice done to someone else and draws links to her own feelings towards her father who treats her unfatherly and to the issue of matricide that eats her up from the inside. She is a typical

teenager – with a poorly developed sense of empathy and a worldview that revolves around herself.

The power structures at display in the first two scenes of violence and injustice towards Rosaleen do not only pertain to race but also to sexist views of women and patriarchal notions of how women should behave towards men – show respect, be meek and obedient. Because she is a woman of colour, Rosaleen is burdened by intersecting oppressions: she is a woman, in a service occupation, and of colour. The Esso-gang exercise power over her because they are white and because they are men and she is a woman of low status to them. The hatred that expresses itself in the Esso-men's behaviour is complicated as it draws on both racism and jealousy: Rosaleen obviously feels good about being on her way to vote, in addition, walking into town with Lily indicates to the men that she has a paying job. The men who have neither a good feeling about their situation nor a paying job cannot ignore the two facts they see before them: a woman of colour who has a better quality of life than they do. The situation is particularly blood boiling because of the overwhelming number of men who beat a single woman and the police who allow the continuation of abuse at the station. At the same time, this strengthens the novel's agenda as it inspires emotions and empathy with the reader.

The third scene also deals with police officials and takes place in the latter parts of the novel, shortly after May commits suicide by drowning. Instead of asking questions about May, the police officer asks Lily why she lives with the Boatwright sisters: “‘Didn't you have any white people back in Spartanburg you could stay with?’ Translation: *Anything would be better than you staying in a colored house*” (245). His underlying assumption is that ‘race matters,’ which the reference to “white people” as opposed to the unpronounced black “others” highlights. It is clear that he thinks it inappropriate for a white girl to live in a household of black women, as if a white girl might be corrupted and influenced by black

culture and living. These observations might be evident in what the police officer says next: “these are colored people here. You understand what I’m saying? [...] I’m just saying that it’s not natural, that you shouldn’t be...well, lowering yourself” (246). The text puts double emphasis on the fact that a police official disapproves of Lily’s stay with the Boatwright sisters, both because of a difference in skin colour and because of a perceived difference in class. Although, as is evident in the text, the sisters are well off in comparison to Lily, and their educations, occupations and house strongly suggest the same. These facts taken into consideration indicates that these officers of the law believe that anything would be better for a white girl than to stay in a house with coloured women.

The text shows racial attitudes as a teenage girl might have perceived them in the American South in the sixties. From what we can see in the novel, despite the new laws, some people were still seen as fundamentally different by many parts of society, even by authorities such as police officers. These acts of prejudice may function as prompts for the reader to notice, compare, and associate with his/her own relations to politics, violence, other men or women and people of colour. The scenes of violent action are there to render the plot more dynamic and create tension and sensation. The tensions in the novel’s plot can, among others, be seen in the boundaries that are created between people by way of segregation and the restrictions that race, class, and gender often create.

2.2.2 Representation of Race: Agency, Body, Invisibility, Mammy

The first representation of race comes at the very beginning of the novel through the representation of Rosaleen. The description is influenced by Lily’s way of thinking that reflects her character’s age in a double sense of the word, both as a 14-year-old girl and the historical era of the sixties. The descriptions of people are based on visual perception, as teenagers often view the world in a visual, literal manner. Rosaleen is the first person who is

described at any length in the novel. The description in the passage below reduces her to an object without free will or agency of her own:

Rosaleen had worked for us since my mother died. My daddy – who I called T. Ray because ‘Daddy’ never fit him – had pulled her out of the peach orchard, where she’d worked as one of his pickers. She had a big round face and a body that sloped out from her neck like a pup tent, and she was so black that night seemed to seep from her skin. She lived in a little house tucked back in the woods, not far from us, and came every day to cook, clean, and be my stand-in mother. Rosaleen had never had a child herself, so for the last ten years I had been her guinea pig. (2)

Four elements in the above quote, which relate to the novel’s initial objectification of Rosaleen, require attention: agency, body, invisibility, and the mammy figure. These four elements overlap and are difficult to separate. First, the notion of agency is intimately bound to the notion of free will and generally entails a certain capacity on the individual level to act independently and to make free choices. Scholars discuss to what extent social restraints impact free will and how the aspect of manifest destiny affects the notion of agency. However, for this context, agency pertains to acts of volition to the extent that “own volition” or “free will” can be said to be an attribute of the characters as they are presented via Lily’s interpretations, reflections and her choice of words for them as she retells their story.

In the context of the novel, there are at least two types of agency: Lily’s and Rosaleen’s. Lily’s agency is always present in the text through her capacity as narrator protagonist; the other characters are always presented to the reader through her gaze. Her agenda is to find out as much as possible about her mother, which inspires this first-person retrospective narrative, and turns it into a coming-of-age novel. The story presents the protagonist’s quest for information and truth that will help her understand her past, reconcile with it, and eventually help her in the process of maturing. Because she both thinks and acts like a child some might argue that her agency is diminished, due to lack of reflection based on age. I would argue, however, that her character has agency and shows it through active

choices, not all of them childish. For example, she runs away from home for a good reason – to find out more about her mother and escape her father’s brutal behaviour – then continues to stay with the Boatwright sisters as she experiences a different and better home environment there. Finally, the confrontation with her father at the very end of the novel shows that she has grown stronger; she has developed a self-awareness that allows her to understand her own needs better, she is able to manage the confrontation better – to be calm in a stressful situation. However, although she makes adult choices and matures in the course of the novel, she also acts like a child. Particularly with the self-absorbed behaviour that is overtly emphasised by the coming-of-age genre and the first-person viewpoint. Most of the time she is concerned with herself and does not seem to be aware of the consequences of her actions towards the other characters and the implications that follow with the manner in which she chooses to describe them. All the time keeping in mind that she is a creation of the author, thus are her agency, actions and authorial choices as well.

Rosaleen is described through Lily’s immature teenage gaze. Her role within T. Ray’s household is one of subordination and reflects power dynamics of both race, gender, and class. Her agency changes in the course of the novel: she has no agency at the beginning of the novel, which in turn functions to objectify and stereotype her. She follows Lily’s lead, and only occasionally speaks up or acts on her own volition. However, from scenes that come later in the novel, as we have seen in the scene with the “Esso-gang,” it is clear that Rosaleen makes her own choices through her decision to register to vote and to spit on the white men’s shoes. In the scene where she is first described, T. Ray moves her from the orchard into the house like a chess piece. This is reflected in the lack of agency on Rosaleen’s part and in the word choice in the paragraph: she has been “pulled out of the peach orchard” and put to the task of looking after Lily (2). Mainly because of the verb “pulled out” – whose synonyms are

dragged, hauled or towed – it might be difficult to argue that she has had a say in the matter. Therefore, it remains unclear whether she has consented to the change of work herself.

On the other hand, Rosaleen must have inspired some kind of trust in T. Ray as he found her suitable to be in charge of Lily in his absence. While T. Ray still keeps an element of control over Lily when he is not around, he has shown himself to be disinterested, unsupportive, and disapproving of Lily's interest in reading and education by hiring an unlettered caretaker. By instating Rosaleen as her nanny, he makes it clear that he does not wish to develop his daughter's intellectual skills and he uses the nanny simply to serve a purpose. T. Ray is a representation of patriarchy, and white privilege and power, as depicted in his behaviour towards Rosaleen in the excerpt above. In addition, he represents a distance to Lily who does not call him "daddy," a word that implies endearment and trust. By calling him by his name, the girl distances herself from him and sees him more as her biological father, than as a person with whom she can find love and comfort. Rosaleen becomes Lily's closest person with whom she feels emotional investment.

Another element in the portrayal of Rosaleen relates to her body and how it is presented through Lily's gaze. This in turn might be seen as an aspect in a process of initial derogative presentation, before a transition occurs when they come closer to Tiburon and the Boatwright sisters' house. At first, Rosaleen is not described as a person; it is rather her body that is presented to the reader. The portrayal of Rosaleen's colour almost moulds her into a dark void that creates an image of night and invisibility, a feeling of being swallowed by impenetrable darkness: "she was so black that night seemed to seep from her skin" (2). Rosaleen almost disappears in her own darkness on the page; she is there, but at the same time she is not. It is her body that is present, not her 'self.' The presentation of Rosaleen's corporeal frame is a recurring theme in the course of the novel. The inability to see her as an individual but rather as a representative of her race is revealed when Lily reflects on the

picture of Rosaleen's mother. She sees the picture as identical to the appearance of Rosaleen herself: "[...] the woman looked exactly like her, with woolly braids, blue-black skin, narrow eyes, and most of her concentrated in her lower portion, like an eggplant" (36). The reference to skin colour, hair texture and body shape reminds one of stereotypical images of black women in caretaker positions, such as the mammy figure. Kimberly Wallace Sanders states that 'mammy' has a "large dark body" (2) who is "grotesquely marked by excess: usually extremely overweight, very tall, broad-shouldered; her skin nearly black" (5) and she often has a "jolly presence" (6). Lily also compares Rosaleen to an inanimate object in her reference to the eggplant by the use of the simile "like."

The lack of agency and the objectification of Rosaleen's body lead to the third issue in the quoted paragraph: the aspect of invisibility. Invisibility cloaks Rosaleen both in terms of her skin colour and her living quarters. As a servant, a mammy and a maid, she lives in her own quarters and is segregated from the visible community that surrounds her. The nominal phrase "a little house tucked back in the woods," creates an image of a romantic, comfortable living space, as if the narrator were trying to offer a hyper-positive image of cosiness and intimacy. Yet the darkness that envelopes the house in the woods overshadows the romantic feeling. It is a dark, invisible and an almost mythic space. The house is situated on the edge of the wilderness, close to nature, thus on the margins of culture.

Since Rosaleen lives in her own house, she cannot be described as a domestic servant. She does the duties of a house cleaner and takes care of Lily as this is a role that has been given to her, which turns her into a mammy figure. This role is also one of invisibility. The house cleaner and caretaker would be there to provide comfort and ease to her employer without creating scenes of discomfort by her presence. She is expected to be nurturing, selfless, strong, and supporting. Lily is aware that Rosaleen is not her biological mother, which is implied when she describes her as her "stand-in-mother" and herself as her "guinea

pig” (*Bees* 2). The mammy figure often had children of her own but, as Lily states, this was not the case with Rosaleen, and Lily becomes her surrogate child. Rosaleen’s lack of a child is paralleled with Lily’s lack of a mother; the loss in one is complemented by the lack in the other. One could argue that they both need each other. However, Lily, as teens often are, seems to be surprisingly disinterested in Rosaleen’s personal background and no new information is provided as to why Rosaleen has no children of her own, and very little is revealed about her life before she started to work in T. Ray’s peach orchard.

From the beginning, Rosaleen is singled out as different, which again might suggest racial difference and stereotyping: she is an object in Lily’s story. At Lily’s 14th birthday, she gives her a cake and milk, whereupon Lily reflects and foreshadows events to come: “The milk left a moon crescent on the darkness of her upper lip, which she didn’t bother to wipe away. Later I would remember that, how she set out, a marked woman from the beginning” (35). The mention of the moon is pervasive in the text, and in this instant, the crescent moon might suggest that Rosaleen lives a half-life – she has no family to speak of, lives in a small house in the woods and takes care of a girl who is not her biological daughter – she is half a mother in some respects. A full moon in the text represents the “Mother” of all, and the image of a semi-circular moon on Rosaleen foreshadows the possibility of a full-life: she is to become more complete when she finds her true community with the calendar sisters. In addition, the crescent is white which might symbolise Lily as part of her or that she is marked by how white people see her – she is tainted and gazed upon. In Rosaleen, the lack of agency, the body foregrounded as her essence, the darkness that seems to render her invisible, in addition to her subordinated role within the Owen household, all contribute to create an initial image of Rosaleen as an object and a powerless prop and pawn in Lily’s story.

Lily’s views of Rosaleen change in the course of the novel, especially after they arrive at the Boatwright residence, but also during the time they spent getting there. A journey from

one place to another is often found to be a formative element in the coming-of-age novel and Lily seems to gradually move away from her upbringing and leaves behind many of her prejudices along the way. However, as Lily's character demonstrates repeatedly, everyone has a blind spot and it is difficult to implement reflections successfully into actions.

As the following quote may highlight, Lily is capable of metacognitive reflections. However, some of her reflections unsettle the image of her as a young teenager, as the reflections are detailed, and they suggest lived-life-experiences. Which in extension suggest author intrusion and a disruption in the story. The quote illustrates how Lily becomes aware that she harbours stereotypical and prejudicial ideas about black women around her.

T. Ray did not think colored women were smart. Since I want to tell the whole truth, which means the worst parts, I thought they could be smart, but not as smart as me, me being white. Lying on the cot in the honey house, though, all I could think was *August is so intelligent, so cultured*, and I was surprised by this. That's what let me know I had some prejudice buried inside me. (97)

Lily's revelation maintains the black/white dichotomy through the word-use of "they" and "me." She thinks she must dig deep to find prejudice in herself and seems surprised to find any. However, as the vocabulary indicates, the prejudice is not flushed out just because it is discovered. Further, Lily clearly believes that she has not met anyone cultured – and coloured – before now, which in itself is a prejudicial attitude: to assume a lack of intelligence until experienced. Therefore, it exposes that Lily thinks the opposite of Rosaleen since she is not mentioned alongside August. Since the beginning of her journey, she has expressed thoughts and acts in a manner that shows the prejudicial sides of her character and she continues to do so throughout the story, towards Rosaleen especially, even if she occasionally shows change of perception through some of her reflections.

As Lily shows some changes in her reflections and actions, so does Rosaleen. Her development peaks especially after fleeing the hospital, where she was treated for her head

and body injuries inflicted by the Esso-gang. The transition that has taken place in Rosaleen is exemplified in the following two examples. First, in the beginning of the novel, when the two of them, Lily and Rosaleen, enter a church to cool down on their way to town for Rosaleen's voting-registration, she asks Lily in front of Brother Gerald, so he heard it clearly, "Ask him if we can have a couple of these fans for your birthday present" (37). This scene takes place before she has the altercation with the Esso-gang, and here she shows no individual voice – she takes up no space and talks through Lily in order to address the Brother. She uses Lily as a mouthpiece to address the white man of the cloth and acts out a hierarchy that lies implicitly and explicitly in society at that time: white man – white girl – coloured woman.

The second example shows Rosaleen confronting Lily on her actions as she tells her off after they have safely escaped the hospital grounds: "You act like you're my keeper. Like I'm some dumb nigger you gonna save. [...] You meant well enough, and I'm glad to be away from there, but did you think once to ask me?" (67-68). Rosaleen has already showed an act of resistance up against white men and come away with it alive – which gives her more strength and willingness to continue her show of agency. Unlike the church episode, this time there is no one else around, just Lily and Rosaleen by a pond in the woods on their way to Tiburon. Lily responds with anger but eventually calms down and asks God for forgiveness before she does Rosaleen: "*Please, God. I didn't mean to treat her like a pet dog. I was only trying to save her*" (69). This example further underlines Lily's prejudicial ideas about Rosaleen as someone who needs to be saved by a teenager. In the woods, Rosaleen responds with anger, but at the hospital she does not stand up against or oppose Lily's idea of escape. Instead, her initial reaction, as in the scene with Brother Gerard in the church, is to go along with the implicit (and very much explicit) rules of hierarchy and thereby – in the hospital-scene – she lets go of her agency by complying against her better judgement.

The two scenes above represent Rosaleen as a character who adheres to power structures in her immediate society: patriarchy and workplace power dynamics. Lily is indirectly the daughter of Rosaleen's employer and one who she needs to listen to even if her job is that of caretaker. However, as they move further away from her place of work, Rosaleen regains some of her agency and raises objections to Lily's behaviour towards her. The combination of the scenes above and their backgrounds shows that power dynamics are complicated and that the representation of them in fiction is equally complex: it is easy to start out with an intention to do justice, but then just as easy to repeat that injustice by misrepresentation and objectification.

Arguably, the process of othering and objectification of black Americans in *Bees* is effectuated through the use of what I term 'race-as-a-prop,' whereby the black characters are visible, yet invisible at the same time. This means that, although the majority of the characters is black, they are only part of a larger context in the white narrator-protagonist's personal project in which she asks herself crucial questions: Was she ever loved by her mother? Did she really kill her? The supporting characters are crucial for the plot in the novel to function. They hold the key to the information Lily seeks about herself and the truth about her mother's death. Thereby, the black characters are used to drive the action forward. This indicates how race is used as a crucial, yet secondary element in the creation of Lily's story. In this case, the representation and use of characters are problematic since they are used as pawns: their historic background and experiences with discrimination and violence are useful for the narrator protagonist's maturation process because their experiences, as viewed by Lily, set her reflection in motion. The selection of characters in a novel are often chosen because they have a purpose within the plot of the novel. Therefore, because there may be an agenda behind the choice of black characters, it emphasises the use of race-as-a-prop in this instance, much because the black characters represent something other than Lily.

The ethics involved in the representation of these characters are questionable and within the scope of ethics lies the notion of othering. This is a process of downplaying the value of another group of people or stigmatising a group one is not part of. Historically, the aspect of othering is closely linked to colonialism and power structures since it was originally coined within post-colonial theory (Jensen 63). Hence, the viewing of someone else as an “other” has played an important role in the history of racial representation.

“Otherness” can also be seen as a factor when societies are divided into groups – segregated – based on race, or when people live at the outskirts of society – much like where Rosaleen lives, and in extension the Boatwright sisters’ house. A top-down perspective on black Americans might have functioned as a push-factor as well as a pull-factor into self-segregation. Self-segregation has been used to describe how African Americans and other marginalised groups have formed their own communities, often negatively described as ghettos. In later discussions of self-segregation, some critics have voiced concern about the recent policy of colour-blindness because of how some people claim to be colour blind but live in entirely white areas and have a limited personal knowledge of other groups apart from people of the same social layers and colour. I use the term to show that people of colour (or other marginalised groups) are sometimes indirectly or directly forced into self-segregation because of prejudice, racism, and exclusion that have prevented them from becoming full members of a “mainstream” society. This society could be said to be largely white and/or governed by white supremacist thought. According to Howard Winant:

[...] white institutionalization of racial difference; [...] and] white resistance to the participation by racially defined minorities in civil society, permitted – and indeed demanded – the organization and consolidation of *excluded communities of color*. Because it had so comprehensively externalized its racial “others,” racial war of manoeuvre helped constitute their resistance and opposition (92, my italics).¹⁴

¹⁴ “Racial war of manoeuvre” can be linked to Du Bois’ “double consciousness” which Winant calls “racial dualism,” as it was “in part an adaptation, a resistance strategy of the oppressed, the excluded, the terrorized, under the conditions of racial war of manoeuvre” (92). Winant takes racial dualism a step further than DuBois’

The Boatwright sisters' house might serve as an example of a self-segregated community since it lies away from the other houses in Tiburon and is situated at the edge of the woods. The sisters live on the margins of society, which might also originate from the fact that August inherited the property from their grandfather. A man who had probably suffered greater oppression and segregation than his granddaughters, he had possibly procured the house because of its location set apart from society, to be left alone – away from abuse. At the time of the Boatwright sisters' ownership of the property, it was uncommon for black women to own a house, a privilege usually reserved for white middle class women and men. The difference between Rosaleen's and August's houses is striking, most notably because of appearance. Although August's house is set apart from other houses, regardless of its distance from the community, it stands out as a beacon of resistance. The house is painted in a vibrant colour, which Lily describes as “so pink it remained a scorched shock on the back of my eyelids after I looked away” (83). The pink colour of the house unsettles the black/white dichotomy observed elsewhere in the novel. It is an awkward colour which calls attention to the place and its residents in the otherwise hidden location. An act of self-segregation from society does not mean to dissolve into oblivion. To live on the margins of society implies freedom to act without society's scrutiny: a safe haven away from prejudice. However, if someone were to come by the house, the colour would be impossible to forget: it is a statement of war against society, a strategic move in a “racial war of position.”

2.3 The Representation of August

The pink house in Tiburon is August's domain. Although it is situated on the outskirts of the town, she has established a thriving bee-business out of her apiaries. When Lily shows up

double consciousness and uses it to explain racial war of manoeuvre which he states is characterised by “a conflict between [...] subordinated groups and [...] a dominant power” (91).

unexpectedly on her doorsteps, August immediately recognizes her and it feels natural for August, given the close relationship she had with Deborah, to take care of Lily (292-93).

Where Rosaleen is a stand in mother for Lily, a stereotypical mammy in many ways because of her looks and behaviour, August provides mothering of a different kind.

“Mother” implies origins, home, nurture and empathy. Merriam Webster defines “mother” as “a female parent.” Although to be a mother and provide mothering does not need to imply biological relationship – as have been the reality for many African American women in caretaker positions throughout the years. Starting with the use of domestic servants and mammies to take care of both white children and children of people who were enslaved, allowed for more effective work at the fields without having to take care of children at the same time.

The ‘Mammy’ stereotype today has many different characteristics: “She is typically a large, dark woman, who wears an oversized dress to accentuate her size and a bright do-rag on her head. She has overly large breasts to emphasize her maternal qualities and negate her sexuality” (Grobman 12). This description fits Rosaleen much more than August. August does not fit the stereotypical appearance to that of a ‘mammy’ and her body is seldom mentioned by Lily. August may have a smaller physical frame than Rosaleen, and references to her figure and body are few as opposed to the descriptions of Rosaleen – by whom Lily is openly fascinated. Once in the honey house August tries to make Lily talk about what is really going on – why she is there – and when Lily does not answer she pulls her down on her lap: ““Lily you can talk to me. You know that, don’t you?” When I didn’t answer, she caught my hand and drew me to her, pulling me right down onto *her lap. It was not mattress deep like Rosaleen’s but thin and angular*” (152, my italics).

Despite the work August and Rosaleen did as ‘mammies’ to both Lily and her mother, the word ‘mammy’ is never used in the novel. Both Rosaleen and August are described as

housekeepers who also took care of the child in their respective households. The closest we come to ‘mammy’ is when Lily describes Rosaleen as her “stand-in mother” at the very beginning of the novel (2). August is not represented as a stereotypical ‘mammy’ figure, she is portrayed with subversive traits. For once, she wears glasses and is described as being intelligent and cultured (89, 97).

Another aspect of August that does not fit the ‘mammy’ stereotype is that of her accessories. Lily describes her first meeting with August inside the pink house when Rosaleen and her first arrive: “August Boatwright entered, wearing a pair of rimless glasses and a lime green chiffon scarf tied onto her belt” (89). August wears her scarf, possibly a do-rag, tied to her belt, which indicates a connection to the mammy figure, but at the same time opposition to be stereotyped as such because it is in her belt, not on her head. It is part of her identity since she was a housekeeper for Lily’s mother and took care of Deborah, but the above description of her indicates that her past is not all she is (293).

However, one of the ‘mammy’ features that August does seem to be represented with is that she takes care of Lily despite the consequences she and her family may face should it be discovered: she is loyal to a fault (to her white family), which disrupts her being represented as a more complex character in the text (Sanders 2). June is the only family member that seems to object, and she is not heard. The inclusion of Lily and Rosaleen into the Boatwright household is an act of empathy. At first the two of them stay at the honey house, across the yard from the main house, but Rosaleen gets accepted into the house as May’s companion. Lily is somewhat physically displaced by the distance from the main house – an allusion to a history of separation between black and white at plantations, only in reverse. However, the work she does is the same as the rest of the family and the sisters always treat Lily with respect and love – with the exception of June who is sceptical.

As well as being empathetic, August is also nurturing and spiritual – all of which could be said to be ‘mother’ qualities. As Rosaleen, August has no children of her own – which itself is a subversive ‘mammy’ trait – and she has taken a stand where marriage is concerned:

‘I decided against marrying altogether. There were enough restrictions in my life without someone expecting me to wait on him hand and foot. Not that I am against marrying, Lily, I’m just against how it is set up.’

[...] ‘Weren’t you ever in love?’ I asked.

‘Being in love and getting married, now that’s two different things. I was in love once, of course I was. Nobody should go through life without falling in love.’

‘But you didn’t love him enough to marry him?’

She smiled at me. ‘I loved him enough,’ she said. ‘I just loved my freedom more.’ (181-82).

The text presents August as someone who values her personal freedom immensely. She does not want to be constricted by the boundaries that constitute marriage. The feminist aspect is clear: the patriarchal construction of marriage will not be part of August’s life. On the other side she accentuates the meaning and importance of love as a part of life and encourages June to marry her boyfriend Neil. Therefore, the feminist aspect and awareness in the representation of August is tainted.

The manner in which the text represents August suggests an impression of her character being a subversive form of mammy figure combined with what Arlene E. Edwards describes as a wise ‘mother.’ Edwards describes these ‘mothers’ as “older women who were seen to possess wisdom and experience tailored to their communities’ needs in particular and to the needs of their race in general” (88). August is often seen to give advice and life wisdom through her story telling – particularly directed at Lily – as we will see in the connection to the bees.

August’s mothering towards Lily and position as a ‘wise mother’ is closely associated to her work with the bees. Many of the life lessons she offers come in stories she tells about

them. Lily's euphoric bee experience starts with the two of them placing their heads on the hive and hearing that "perfect hum" (184) – like the start of a meditation session in Buddhism. August also connects the spirituality of the Black Madonna with feminist spirituality in the life lessons that she offers, many of which come in the form of stories about bees and the moon. These life lessons guide Lily on her journey. Although Lily looks for information about her mother, she receives additional information that she was not prepared for, but that drives her to go into reflections about who she is and how she sees the world and others in it. By being part of a community of women she learns that they are individuals that contribute to the community and that they are stronger together. Her story is equally a journey in self-healing, of creating bonds with women who have lived lives where they have had to find strength in themselves and each other.

‘[...] And when you get down to it, Lily, that's the only purpose grand enough for a human life. Not just to love – but to persist in love.’

She paused. Bees drummed their sound into the air. August retrieved her hands from the pile on my chest, but I left mine there.

‘This Mary I'm talking about sits in your heart all day long saying, “Lily, you are my everlasting home. Don't you ever be afraid. I am enough. We are enough.”’

I closed my eyes, and in the coolness of morning, there among the bees, I felt for one clear instant what she was talking about.

When I opened my eyes, August was nowhere around. I looked back toward the house and saw her crossing the yard, her white dress catching the light. (357-58)

With reference to the cleansing ritual of the Black Madonna statue on Mary Day earlier in the text, the “black-and-white stack of hands resting upon my [Lily's] chest” emphasises the importance of the advice August offers – it is part of Lily's cleanse where she gradually lets go of her guilt and the wound of matricide becomes less painful (357). In addition, the guidance taps into both feminist spirituality and self-help literature where in the former it is necessary to locate the goddess within and in the latter come to believe that ‘you are not alone in this world’ and ‘the purpose of life is “to persist in love.”’ When August crosses the yard in

her white dress, she evokes a spiritual feeling of something out of this world: she is there but suddenly she is not – she disappears.¹⁵

August's spirituality combined with the aspects of 'mammy' and mothering add to the fairy tale quality of the story. There is something aloft, airy, that lies between the lines and makes the story interesting despite its flaws in representation. The bees add to this airy, magical feeling. It starts with the bees in Lily's room in the house she shares with her father; they swarm inside the walls during the day and come out at midnight every night: "The way those bees flew, not even looking for a flower, just flying for the feel of the wind, split my heart down its seam" (1). Lily feels confined and restricted in her life with her father. Patriarchy has its grip on her and she cannot get away – she is not free. In the first chapter, the bees are used to symbolise this feeling of imprisonment – she catches some of them in a jar, keeps them there, but decides that they need to be free so she opens the lid (13). The bees stay in the jar, immobilised; they have become accustomed to the restrictions made by the glass boundaries in the jar (34). Another night she runs to wake her father to show him the whirlwind of bees that swarms just for her: "'Bees!' I shouted. 'There's a swarm of bees in my room!' But when we got there, they'd vanished back into the wall like they knew he was coming, like they didn't want to waste their flying stunts on him" (5). It seems that the bees are represented with agency: T.Ray does not deserve a show; he has a patriarchal manner of existence: he runs his household with a strict hand, and he is a father who abuses his power and authority over Lily.

¹⁵ In extension, this scene brings to mind the stereotype of the magical Negro. However, since the spiritual aspect is stronger and this scene is the one scene this stereotype is specifically evoked, the aspect will not be further examined.

2.4 The Chapter Epigraphs

Thoroughly represented in the novel in several manners are the bees: they are both directly present in the novel's storyline throughout the text from the very beginning, and they are the constituting part of each chapter epigraph. The epigraphs function as a literary device that allude to the upcoming theme or topic of the following chapter. In the same fashion, they also invite attention to comparisons between them and the content of the given chapter – and the text as a whole.

From the beginning of the novel the epigraphs foreshadow the events to come. The epigraph in chapter 1 foreshadows three important themes in the novel: “The queen, for her part, is the unifying force of the community; if she is removed [...] they show unmistakable signs of queenlessness” (1). First, the fact that “the queen” is present, this could mean the goddess the statue in the sisters' parlour, August as matriarch, or simply mother in a wider view. Second, it implies that a mother or a queen has been removed, which foreshadows that Lily's mother have died. Third, “signs of queenlessness” implies that Lily experiences rootlessness because of her mother's death. The next epigraph tells of “leaving the old nest,” and refers to the journey Rosaleen and Lily embarks on in that chapter, from Sylvan to Tiburon, and so it goes on for the duration of the text: the epigraphs allude to the content of the upcoming chapter.

The bees add to the spiritual feeling of the text and tie together the feminine aspect: a young girl, coloured women, who together form a community of women, a female goddess in their midst, and the matriarchal bee society – with the queen bee as mother of thousands – that encapsulates the story about them. In an interview with Heidi Schlumpf about the novel in 2003, Kidd comments on the use of the bees and draws connections between them, Virgin Mary, and the Boatwright household of women (29). Kidd states that she has found evidence that Virgin Mary has been referred to as “the sacred bee” in medieval hymns and that “her

womb is the hive from which Christ the honey flows” (29). In extension, Lily refers to Our Lady of Chains in the sister’s parlour to as “the mother of thousands”: “*I live in a hive of darkness, and you are my mother, I told her. You are the mother of thousands*” (204). The darkness symbolises the secret Lily carries, which she has not yet told August, it consumes her, and the only way out is through the love of a mother – spiritually or earthly.

In the interview, Kidd further connects the calendar sisters to the bees when she explains that:

[...] a hive is a feminine community, and that’s exactly what I was writing about in the pink house. It was like a hive of women who were trying to make something good out of their loss and sorrow, out of the struggles with civil rights, out of the pain that they live with. It’s like you take these holes life gives you and you make honey. (Schlumpf 29)

The intention of this comparison is good, as we can see from Kidd’s explanation above. However, there is an added layer of meaning that may be seen in the continued emphasis and use of the bees in the novel as a whole. The comparison with the hive as “a feminine community” is authentic – it corresponds to a real-life beehive. In the novel, August explains to Lily more about the inner workings in a beehive and that each bee has its special tasks to keep the machinery of the hive going, which in extension can be associated with the Boatwright sisters’ household and with society at large (185).

If we compare the beehive to the Boatwright household only, it may not be with the best outcome. In a hive there is a “family unit, comprising a single egg-laying female or queen and her many sterile daughters called workers” (83). August does not have children; neither does any of her sisters – maybe we can ask the question whether the women in the house all function as workers in this context. Inside a hive, it is dark; therefore, one must become adjusted to the darkness to understand its processes (101). The “darkness” also alludes to Lily’s cloud of desperation and search for clarity and understanding regarding her

mother's death. However, more importantly, the darkness alludes to the Boatwright household and that Lily needs to live with them for a while – to see them more clearly for the individuals they are – in order to gradually let go of her blurred, racist vision of Black Americans, as she gets to know them.

In the text, parallels seem to be drawn between the mysteries of the hive and Lily's lack of understanding of coloured people, because they live "in a hive of darkness," in their own secluded community at the outskirts of town. In addition, the link between the worker bees and the African American women characters brings to mind the age of slavery, which in extension emphasises the fact that the black people in the novel are props, who enable the storyline's drive forward, and thus Lily's process of healing and maturation. In this respect, Black aids white, which implies a reproduction of earlier structures of power and an indirect enabling of structural racism today.

2.5 Conclusion

The text represents both Rosaleen and August with certain stereotypical traits, most notably that of the mammy: "Although neither Rosaleen nor August has children of her own, their love for their white charges perpetuates the destructive myth that has been embodied by Morrison's Pauline and countless Mammy stereotypes before her" (Grobman 12). Rosaleen represents the stereotypical mammy, whereas August is the subversive one mixed with wise mother traits. At the same time, one of the defining aspects of mother, mammy and mothering, however stereotypical, is love, and love is essential when it comes to healing as both self-love and love for others can help heal wounds. Love taps into the feminist spirituality project, permeates the novel, and is in many ways one of its main themes. In addition, these two women are also portrayed with a certain closeness to nature and the spiritual, which can be linked to stereotypical ideas of African Americans. However, the

closeness to nature and the spiritual does not need to imply stereotype, as the two aspects also are associated with feminist spirituality, which is an ideology that is firmly grounded in the plot.

One might argue that Lily – as a 14-year-old – has a better understanding of politics, life experiences and the other characters' minds than one would expect for a girl her age. In addition, the epigraphs in the beginning of each chapter indicate an author-intrusion in the same manner as when Lily argues or reflects in ways that would seem too mature for her age. In this way, by using a child and the natural implications it entails of teenage immaturity and learned racism, Kidd may consequently excuse much of the text's representation and use of African American characters.

Nonetheless, the intent to give space to – and make visible in a text – African American characters does not excuse the white privilege present in the act. The actual manner in which the characters have been staged as Lily's helpers brings to mind how colonisers have used the colonised for centuries. The power structures are imbalanced despite the attempts at a nuanced portrayal. Even if there is an effort in the text to bring women together across racial boundaries – to become powerful together against patriarchy – through love and healing: “[...] white women's ‘good intentions’ towards women of color, do not lessen the pain of colonialism or alter material conditions of existence” (Crowley 11). One may ask whether it is necessary with another novel where a white author use African Americans as the main background material, and whether it is possible to use love as both its excuse and as a remedy that will heal wounds on both sides.

Arguably, too many novels of this kind, where African American character are present but represented as background props – only there to aid the main protagonist, who is white – contribute to the maintenance of stereotypes and structural racism. One of the actions one can take, in order to dismantle stereotypes and structural racism, is to represent African American

as full, well-rounded characters who are foregrounded in the plot of the story in question.

However, herein lies the dispute of identity politics: no white person can presume to understand what it is like to experience and feel racism such as a person of colour. Therefore, it may prove highly problematic to write novels where the main character or one of the main characters is black if the author is white – especially in the USA because of the country's historical background of slavery, segregation, racism, and structural racism.

Conclusion

The common view among the critics seems to be that the supporting characters in *The Secret Life of Bees* are full-fledged characters. According to a review in *New York Times*, the Boatwright sisters “are no mere vehicles for Lily's salvation; they are individuals as fully imagined as the sweltering, kudzu-carpeted landscape that surrounds them” (Mazmanian). However, this assumption is either flawed or overly simplified and is where my interpretation has differed from many of the reviews and previous readings of the novel. There are at least two reasons for this; one, they are supporting characters that are viewed and represented through the eyes of a white, fourteen-year-old narrator-protagonist. This makes it difficult to consider them as well-developed, judging by the fact that they are one-sidedly represented, seen from the outside, and, as mentioned, through the white gaze. Many of the scenes in the novel prompt emotional reactions; some of these are of a political nature and show prejudice and racism. These scenes are presented by the narrator-protagonist and are often followed by a reflection, which disrupts the importance of the scene for the African American characters, who simply are secondary to Lily's maturation process. Consequently, these disturbances – Lily's erratic thinking and narcissistic focus – unsettle an in-depth portrayal of African American characters because everything in the text revolves around her personal development and inner struggles. The supporting characters become just that – a support that drives the action and Lily's maturation forward, they are key in driving the plot. The novel's genre only adds to the problem because it appears to legitimise this use of African American characters.

Two, as my analysis has shown, the characters build on racist stereotypes of African American women as mammies and caregivers to white children – and present them as such – and, in effect perpetuate these stereotypes. Yet, there is a subversive streak in the representation of August as a mammy figure. Even in Mazmanian's review, intended to be positive and praiseworthy, something is amiss: the African American characters are equalled

with the landscape as “individuals as fully imagined as the sweltering, kudzu-carpeted landscape that surrounds them.”

This thesis’ examination of the representation of Our Lady of Chains and the characters of Rosaleen and August, shows how the two characters are the products of appropriation, both in relation to real life and to literature. Since literature draws on and reflects life by deliberate use and representation of characters and objects, it is natural to assume that there is a link between the novel and real life. The novel shows its cultural and racial appropriation in a textual and fictional context by way of the imagined lives and culture of African American men and women, and the religious figure of the Virgin Mary – as a young white woman sees them. Thus, the characters and the religious figure are doubly represented through the white gaze and imagination: white author and white narrator-protagonist.

The ideas of white racial guilt, feminine spirituality, and feminist politics can in some ways explain the conscious choice to include African American characters in the novel, paired with the incessant focus on healing and love. Love and feminist spirituality are used as the transcendent glue that binds everyone in the novel together – specifically the women – and for a community that rises above race (although not gender). Sue Monk Kidd explains in an interview that:

As a person with a spiritual slant, I don’t just want to mirror a society or culture that is lost and filled with hopelessness. There are enough books about that. I think writers can reflect the reality of the world we live in, but we can go beyond that and also say there is hope, and there is transformation, and there is this transcendent power of love that can change our lives. (Schlumpf 30)

Thus, an effort to present ostensibly full, complete and round black characters in a positive light during in the Civil Rights era and with references to slavery segregation and racial prejudice can be seen as an intent to right wrongs, heal a guilty conscience, and mend broken relationships. However, through this attempt, the characters’ representations draw on

preconceived notions of African Americans as seen by an immature, possibly traumatised and neglected, 14-year-old girl. The representations become appropriations created out of a white imagination.

One cannot assume that a novel in itself can give an image of a situation that is applicable to North America as a whole. However, given the presumption that literature might mirror aspects of society, it can give a glimpse into the ideas of one person's view of a part of society at a given time. In addition, it is reasonable to assume – considering the recent Black Lives Matter demonstrations throughout the country and the publicity in the media – that race and appropriation continue to be sensitive issues in the US, even if some scholars refer to the political and social spheres of the early twenty-first century as the so-called “*post-race*” era (Norman 155).¹⁶ It is clear that racial discrimination, which potentially includes appropriation, has a troubled history that impacts American lives and imagination even today, despite the belief that the twenty-first century is a “*post-race*” era, supposedly characterised by colour-blind political correctness. As Howard Winant bluntly states in the opening of his article, “Racial Dualism at Century’s End,” the US is “a nation built on the soil of conquest, battered on the theft of human beings” (87).¹⁷ Here, “*Post-race*” signifies a perceived achievement of equality between races, which in effect eliminates race as such, thus also race-related issues. The purpose of a post-racial philosophy might be seen as an effort to transcend race. However, even as Jim Crow laws and segregation are allegedly a matter of the past, outdated views and ignorance regarding the concept of “race” and white privilege, racial prejudice, and

¹⁶ Chad Dion Lassiter, in his talk “Has America Lost its Way,” refers to “post-racial America” as a “mirage.” Obama’s presidency (his middle-class background, college education, and academic career) and the politics of colour-blindness, contributed to this illusion of a “post-racial” America. Lassiter states that “white supremacy is as old as Empire” and that even today (2016) the “ruling class profits from racism.” Some places in the States, “black and white relationships are still frowned upon,” the KKK is currently recruiting a staggering number of members and police shoot black young men in the streets (cp. two documentaries from 2015: Reggie Yates’: “Race Riots USA” and Dan Murdoch’s: “KKK: The Fight for White Supremacy”). In addition, appropriation of black music, culture and hairstyles continues to pose a problem (cp. Kardashian sisters’ use of cornrows for example).

¹⁷ Winant modifies himself in his following sentence and states: “Yet it is not only this” (87).

discrimination still prevail. Nevertheless, few would openly admit to having prejudicial racial beliefs.

In most peoples' imagination, 'America' is a place where dreams come true and all are treated equally before the law and in society in general. "The Dream" as something available to all people in the US is a myth, because people do not have the same starting point from where to work on their dream and thereby climb the social ladder. Structural racism and prejudice add to the obstacles many minorities face when attempting upward mobility. The general population of the US, as well as people from other countries, saw the election of Barack Obama as a sign that America has moved beyond racial prejudice, and moved into a *post-race* era where race no longer matters. However, the election of Donald Trump and the rhetoric that he uses have severely disrupted the image of a moving away from racial differences. One can only hope that the situation will change with the Joe Biden administration, but this is very unlikely. In addition, because of ongoing discrimination, police violence, and a discrepancy between political correctness and "real life," there seems to be, what Chad Dion Lassiter terms a "racial elephant in the room" that prevents an acceptance of today as being a part of a *post-race* era.

I believe that by repeating the history of slavery, segregation, and discrimination – and capitalising on it –, that this history is kept alive in peoples' imagination. Likewise, Lassiter admits that he does not see the point with white people capitalising on black people's history of suffering and pain through films and novels, and asks the question if this is not a continuation of keeping that history alive today. Then again, it is important not to forget historic events in order not to repeat them in the future. However, I still argue that it is problematic that many books about African American suffering and pain have been written by white authors and therefore add to white capital. In this respect, white people capitalise on Black suffering twice – first through slavery and then through writing about it and the people

it concerns.¹⁸ Furthermore, narrations about this historic past, which some would say contain elements that are still very much present today, may contribute to preserving skewed power structures, perpetuating stereotypes, and prejudices about African Americans, especially if written by Caucasians. More importantly, those stories occupy the space for new stories that are crucial for the creation of new history and more appropriate representations.

On the positive side, Sue Monk Kidd has created a story that is filled with compassion, love, and hope for a better future. The novel is flushed with spirituality, symbolism, contemplation, self-help advice, and issues that are important and formative in a young girl's life. On the other hand, the novel's overall use and representation of African American characters may disrupt its idyllic and utopian image of maturation and feminism that transcends boundaries of race.

The novel's storyline is problematic because of America's historic past, and I have argued that the past and the present seem to converge and merge in the text in a manner that invites questions of how to represent an 'other.' For example, the use of black characters as 'helpers' in Lily's coming-of-age process, reveals complicated and ethical dilemmas such as power structures, the colonial past, white privilege, and identity politics. In addition, elements of cultural and racial appropriation and white racial guilt are closely related to the portrayal and use of coloured American characters, which raise ethical dilemmas about representation. Therefore, it is vital to ask if this novel is able to nurture an understanding of love and compassion that can help transcend racial boundaries. Alternatively, one can ask whether the novel fails in its implied wider agenda because of its use and representation of African American characters as support and props – which in turn repeat and perpetuate stereotypes, and arguably also repeat colonial abuse of minorities – consequently becoming an example of misappropriation.

¹⁸ Slavery has greatly contributed to North America's economic growth.

If we do not acknowledge their existence, systems of power and advantage are perpetuated, also through literature – popular fiction included. It may be especially difficult and complicated to detect and shed light on appropriation and distorted representations of others when it comes to literature, given the creative freedom that all writers enjoy. It is nonetheless important to keep in mind that popular literature offers different perceptions of the “other” and society in general that also needs to be taken into consideration.

Bees is a well-written novel that celebrates women and the feminine. The Boatwright-sisters’ household in Tiburon creates a safe haven not only for Lily and Rosaleen, but for the female reader as well, who is drawn into the spiritual sphere filled with love, compassion, symbolisms, bees, the Feminine Divine, and a community of supporting women – a space where feminine qualities are accepted. This is a space where power structures are reversed, the patriarchy is replaced with a matriarchy. In these respects, it completes its agenda of staging a feminist spirituality project. However, the traditional reversal of structures seen in the novel does not represent a feminism that is either wanted or achievable in society; it is a utopian idea and does not parallel ideas of feminism today, which relies more on the notion of equality between the sexes rather than a reversal.

In addition, through their representation in the novel, the Lady of Chains and the African American characters become commodities – articles of trade – as they are used as props in a white project. Consequently, the novel itself becomes a product – a self-help novel – that helps its presumed readership recover from white racial guilt. Thus, it becomes another object to amass – in a collection of Jim Crow memorabilia – together with other novels written by white authors about predominantly black characters.

This is a novel created by a white author for a white audience about a white girl, but also mainly about black characters who help shape the person the narrator-protagonist matures into. The representation of the characters is the product of both the author’s

descriptions and narrative choices but also depends on who the reader is and his or her background. We all read with our backgrounds, and for Caucasians it is difficult to see how representation can be misguided, especially in the representation of African Americans – as is evident in the overweight of positive praise for the novel, as opposed to its lack of criticism.

Despite efforts to understand, deal with and transcend racial issues, they seem to permeate many layers of society and culture, and perhaps will continue to do so for an unforeseeable period of time. Hence, the “post” in *post-race* should be thought of as an aspiration rather than a reality, which in addition implies that Du Bois’ stated problem of the twentieth century – “the colour-line” – to some extent continues to exist in this century as well. In short, as William Faulkner put it almost seventy years ago “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” – still rings true (85).

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