

## **CHAPTER THREE**

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Othermothers can be [the] key not only in supporting children but also in helping bloodmothers who, for whatever reason, lack the preparation or desire for motherhood. (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 180)

The aim of this chapter is to examine the contribution of non-biological mothers or “other mothers” in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (2008), and Bebe Moore Campbell’s *Singing in the Comeback Choir* (1998). This chapter looks into the impact made by these other mothers in the lives of someone else’s children, how they rose above themselves to mother someone. This chapter tries to show how these non-biological mothers fulfil the role of motherhood in their varying capacities, and how their roles are factored into the narratives.

The hypotheses taken up in this chapter are

- i. that it is not necessary for a woman to be a mother in the biological sense to possess mothering qualities;
- ii. that sometimes such women can raise children more effectively than the blood mothers;
- iii. that it is not a given that other mothers are always beneficial for the child; sometimes other mothering can also be harmful or misdirected.

‘Other mother’ generally implies a woman who takes on the responsibility of taking care of someone’s else’s child, without herself being a birth mother. This tradition is common to African cultures and is believed to have been introduced in America by the slave women. In African American culture, this concept is popular in the American South. Even Southern women who migrate to the North continue with this tradition as far as possible, if not always as other mothers then as community mothers. This has been discussed by Christian and Collins.

Children orphaned by sale or death of their parents under slavery, children conceived through rape, children of young mothers, children born into extreme poverty or to alcoholic or drug-addicted mothers, or children who for other reasons cannot remain with their bloodmothers have all been supported by othermothers, who take in additional children even when they have enough of their own. (Collins 180)

Other mothers are found in the works of all the major African American writers: Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston, to name a few. It has been observed that such mothers possess nurturing qualities that sometimes interrogate/challenge maternity in the traditional sense of the term.

Other mothering is necessary because the biological mothers are either not there or are unable to provide proper care for their children. In some genuine cases like that of mae in *A Mercy*, the separation is warranted by the situation. In the case of Ruth who is always present, it is guidance that Pilate offers to her nephew Milkman in *Song of Solomon*. Leafy, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is another example of a mother who chooses to escape rather than take care of her young daughter, Janie. Under such circumstances these children are brought up by women, other than their birth mothers, who take proper care of them. This chapter examines the concept of other mothering through the characters of women like Lina (*A Mercy*), Nanny (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*) and Lindy (*Singing in the Comeback Choir*) who play significant roles in the upbringing and nurturing of the children.

The concept of “other mothering” is defined by Patricia Hill Collins, who in *The Black Feminist Thought* (1990):

In many African-American communities, fluid and changing boundaries often distinguish biological mothers from other women who care for children. Biological mothers, or blood mothers, are expected to care for their children. But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, other mothers—women who assist blood mothers by

sharing mothering responsibilities— traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood (*Thought* 178).

In African American communities other mothers play a crucial role in the care of children. The real mother may not be able to look after her children as she has to earn her living elsewhere. The Black mother has to support her family as well as look after the home in her off time. She has to maintain her home and family and also go out and work to provide for them.

It is seen from various critical reviews that the role of other mothers in shaping the character of another person's child, (specifically the central character) has hardly been addressed in these works. The roles of the blood mother and other mother can be checked for their different contributions in the upbringing of the children. This is seen in the roles Ruth and Pilate play in *Song of Solomon*. The other mothers chosen for this study are—Nanny Crawford in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Lina in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, and Lindy in Bebe Moore Campbell's *Singing in the Comeback Choir*.

It is seen that other mothers are helpful people who try to fill in the gap left by the mother's actual or notional absence. Sometimes however, the care given by the other mother may make her feel that she can command a degree of loyalty for her sacrifices. Nanny expects Janie to marry an older man for security and is not happy at the objections coming her way.

#### Nanny as othermother to Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Janie is seen to be under the care of Nanny Crawford who is her grandmother. People call her Nanny because of her work with her employers and Janie calls her the same like anybody else. Janie's mother, we are told left after giving birth to her. Since Janie knew nothing about her father, Nanny was all she had. Nanny is deeply committed to Janie's welfare and considers security the first contributing factor towards contentment. She admits that she knows nothing about love; one marries and commits oneself to loving one's husband. Janie who has different ideas, finds it hard to internalise Nanny's philosophy. Nanny tells her:

Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of what a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of de hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can't stop you from wishin'. You can't beat nobody down so low till you can rob'em of their will. (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 47)

Nanny wants to make sure that Janie does not suffer some of the things that she herself did. She is worried about a young girl being on her own and getting into trouble like her daughter Leafy did. Not having any choices to make, she cannot understand Janie's desire to explore life a little.

Nanny mentions her life in slavery where she was raped by her master. He goes to join the war after her daughter Leafy's birth. When the lady of the house discovers the child's resemblance to her husband, she loses her self control and promises to make nanny suffer by getting her whipped and selling the baby: “Ah wouldn't dirty my hands on yuh. But first thing in the mornin' de overseer will take you to de whippin' post and tie you down on yo' knees and cut de hide offa yo' yaller back,”(49). In order to save herself and her baby from such fury Nanny flees to the swamps. Fortunately, Nanny manages to escape and hide in the swamps till the end of the war. She then works for a white family, looking after her daughter at the same time. However, Leafy is raped by a schoolteacher: “Dat school teacher had done hid her in de woods all night long, and he done raped mah baby and run on off just before day”(51). After she gave birth to Janie, she “took drinkin' likker and stayin' out nights,” (51) and eventually ran away. Since then Janie had been in the care of her grandmother, who hoped to make a better job with her.

As far as Nanny is concerned, Janie should know about the real world they are living in. Her main concern is to get Janie settled under somebody's care in marriage. She belongs to the old school which believes that a woman needs looking after. She wants to protect Janie from making the mistakes her daughter committed:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he

don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!" (46)

What Nanny points out is that the black woman has to live with the pressures of racism as well as patriarchy. Not only is she discriminated against outside, she also has to put up with the demands of the men at home. She only hopes that with her granddaughter, the equation would have changed somewhat.

Later as she grows up, Nanny explains the need to make a good match:

"Don't think Ah don't feel wid you, Janie, 'cause Ah do. Ah couldn't love yuh no more if Ah had uh felt yo' birth pains mahself. Fact uh de matter, Ah loves yuh a whole heap more'n Ah do yo' mama, de one Ah did birth. But you got to take in consideration you ain't no everyday chile like most of 'em. You ain't got no papa, you might jus' as well say no mama, for de good she do yuh. You ain't got nobody but me. And mah head is ole and tilted towards de grave. Neither can you stand alone by yo'self. De thought uh you bein' kicked around from pillar tuh post is uh hurtin' thing. Every tear you drop squeezes a cup uh blood outa mah heart. Ah got tuh try and do for you befo' mah head is cold." (48)

Nanny has to try and convince Janie that she has her interests at heart. That is why she insists that Janie is as dear to her as any child she might have given birth to if not more. She also drives home the point that since Janie has no one else apart from her grandmother to look out for her, Nanny has to arrange a suitable marriage for her.

She continues with an account of her struggle to first bring up her daughter Leafy and then when Leafy is raped at seventeen, her child (Janie). The shocking events derail Leafy and she takes to drinking and staying away, and it is left to Nanny to act as a mother to her granddaughter. That is what she says here:

And, Janie, maybe it wasn't much, but Ah done de best Ah kid by you. Ah raked and scraped and bought dis lil piece uh land so you wouldn't have to stay in de white folks' yard and tuck yo' head befo' other chillun at school (52).

Describing herself as ‘a cracked plate,’ Nanny feels that she has to settle Janie’s future if she can before dying.

When Janie shows an interest in love and sex Nanny refuses to discuss them with her. She wants to protect Janie from taking foolish decisions and suffering disillusionment. Knowing well that she would not live long, Nanny wants to settle things for her granddaughter before dying. She tries reasoning and emotional blackmail with Janie till the latter falls in with her plans. Janie marries Logan Killics, picked for her as a suitable husband by her grandmother, but her marriage proves to be a failure. Janie finds little to connect with the middle aged Killics.

Two months after her marriage, she goes to see Nanny about her disappointment. She complains: “‘Cause you told me Ah mus go inter love him, and, and Ah don’t. Maybe if somebody was to tell me how, Ah could do it.”(54) Janie, though bewildered, still believes in what her grandmother told her, that love and marriage go hand in hand.

“If you don’t want him, you sho oughta. Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo’ parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road and...Lawd have mussy!” (55)

Nanny advises Janie to love her husband and once again tries to reassure her that she eventually will. She states that a commitment is sometimes hard work, but a woman is capable of learning how to love. She believes that she acts in Janie’s best interest and therefore does not see anything wrong in manipulating her granddaughter.

For Nanny, money, a home, security, are more important than sentiment. She asks Janie to try her best at making love happen in her marriage. She knows that no such thing was possible but was not above manipulating Janie so that she could hold onto her marriage and security. “Tain’t no use in you cryin’, Janie. Grandma done been long uh few roads herself. But folks is meant to cry ’bout somethin’ or other. Better leave things de way dey is. Youse young yet. No tellin’ whut mout happen befo’ you die. Wait awhile, baby. Yo’ mind will change.” (57)

Nanny tries to tell Janie that disappointments are a part of life and that one has to learn to live with them. She teaches her patience, that she still had her whole life ahead of her, and things might change at a future date.

Nanny understands what is wrong in Janie's marriage but does not have any alternative for her. At least her husband had a home and some money to get by. Once Janie's returns home, Nanny explains her actions to God in her prayers:

And when she gained the privacy of her own little shack she stayed on her knees so long she forgot she was there herself. There is a basin in the mind where words float around on thought and thought on sound and sight. Then there is a depth of thought untouched by words, and deeper still a gulf of formless feelings untouched by thought. Nanny entered this infinity of conscious pain again on her old knees. Towards morning she muttered, "Lawd, you know mah heart. Ah done de best Ah could do. De rest is left to you." She scuffled up from her knees and fell heavily across the bed. A month later she was dead. (57)

Hurston is figurative in her presentation of Nanny's dilemma. Nanny had reached a state of mind where everything could not be articulated in words but there was no doubting the depth of feeling behind her 'formless feelings.'

What Nanny ignored in the process of seeking happiness for Janie is her individual freedom and desires. Nanny's over protective nature creates a wall between herself and her granddaughter ultimately leading to a kind of hatred in Janie's mind. Janie feels that:

She hated her grandmother and had hidden it from herself all these years under a cloak of pity....But she had been...run off down a back road after *things*....Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon—for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you—and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love. (130)



‘What Janie realizes is that Nanny had not allowed her to discover herself, nor to spread her wings a little. She had not even been given any options as far as her future was concerned. What Nanny had foolishly considered as judicious had been presumptuous on her part as she had taken it upon herself to determine Janie’s future, unmindful of the young girl’s wishes. As Janie sees it, Nanny had tried to reach out to an impalpable horizon which she could fit around her granddaughter. What the old woman had failed to understand was that it would strangle Janie’s dreams if not her spirit. While Nanny had sought security over more elusive things like romance for Janie, the latter felt that she had been sold false dreams of love following marriage. Once Janie realizes that, she starts looking beyond her marriage to Logan Killicks.

Killicks gradually tries to involve Janie in farm work but she is not very willing. She knows that despite her efforts, the gap between her and her husband had increased day by day. He feels that he had been over indulgent with her. She realizes that she dislikes him with little or no empathy. Her ideas about love and marriage do not materialize. It is around that time that she meets Jody Starks who seems much more exciting than Killicks and runs away with him to a different life. For once it is not Nanny but Janie herself who makes the choice.

Though Janie’s marriage was Nanny’s handiwork, she cannot take all the blame as she feels that her intentions were good. Janie does not realize till much later how she had allowed her grandmother to persuade her into a loveless marriage. Consequently Janie admits to hating Nanny who had interfered with her freedom. Janie complies with Nanny’s plans but she never seems to acknowledge what Nanny had done for her. It is this search for freedom that persuaded Janie to leave her first husband and run off with Jody Starks. Though Starks could provide Janie with material goods, she was unhappy with him. The safety and security that Nanny so desperately wanted to provide for Janie was definitely prevalent in Starks’ house but, according to Janie, he spoke far beyond the horizon. Her voice, her opinions did not count.

Janie recalls times when she tried reasoning with Jody, her second husband, only to be told that women cannot think straight. The following conversation between the two shows the lie of the land:

“You sho loves to tell me whut to do, but Ah can’t tell you nothin’ Ah see!”

“Dat’s ’cause you need tellin’,” he rejoined hotly. “It would be pitiful if Ah didn’t. Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don’t think none theirselves.”

“Ah knows uh few things, and womenfolks thinks sometimes too!”

“Aw naw they don’t. They just think they’s thinkin’. When Ah see one thing Ah understands ten. You see ten things and don’t understand one.”

Times and scenes like that put Janie to thinking about the inside state of her marriage. Time came when she fought back with her tongue as best she could, but it didn’t do her any good. It just made Joe do more. He wanted her submission and he’d keep on fighting until he felt he had it. (110)

Janie looks back and understands that their relationship had not been that of equals. She had had to submit for peace in the household. The ego war would lead her nowhere. She recalls the first time he slapped her when the dinner she had prepared had not been cooked properly:

It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over. (111)

That incident is enough to remind Janie that she has a mind of her own with thoughts that she had not shared with anybody. “She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them (111). Janie becomes aware that the actual person and the figure in her dreams are two different people. In a way she had been in love with love like any young woman, and discovers too late, her mistake. From then on she carries on with the social niceties, without putting her heart and soul in them.

The death of Jody Starks her second husband, marks another change in her:

Joe's funeral was the finest thing Orange County had ever seen with Negro eyes. The motor hearse, the Cadillac and Buick carriages; Dr. Henderson there in his Lincoln; the hosts from far and wide.... Janie starched and ironed her face and came set in the funeral behind her veil. It was like a wall of stone and steel. The funeral was going on outside. All things concerning death and burial were said and done. Finish. End. Never-more. Darkness. Deep hole. Dissolution. Eternity. Weeping and wailing outside. Inside the expensive black folds were resurrection and life. She did not reach outside for anything, nor did the things of death reach inside to disturb her calm. She sent her face to Joe's funeral, and herself went rollicking with the springtime across the world. (129)

Janie feels disoriented during her husband's funeral ceremony because she has a bizarre moment of illumination about herself. She realizes that another chapter in her life is over, and it again goes back to what Nanny had told her about security.

She starts thinking about her youthful dreams and the reality of the last twenty years. Just before her husband's death she tells him as much:

"You wouldn't listen. You done lived wid me for twenty years and you don't halfknow me at all. And you could have but you was so busy worshipping de works of yo' own hands, and cuffin' folks around in their minds till you didn't see uh whole heap uh things yuh could have." (126)

She feels that her wishes and ideas had no place in their lives as her husband swept everything else in his way to fulfilling his ambitions. She had no doubt wanted prosperity, but she had also wanted love. What her husband could give her was only success in the material terms of the American Dream.

Janie insists on speaking up as her husband lay dying:

"Naw, you gointuh listen tuh me one time befo' you die. Have yo' way all yo' life, trample and mash down and then die ruther than tuh let yo'self heah 'bout it. Listen,

Jody, you ain't de Jody ah run off down de road wid. You'se whut's left after he died. Ah run off tuh keep house wid you in uh wonderful way. But you wasn't satisfied wid me de way Ah was. Naw! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me.”(127)

What Janie regrets is the loss of freedom, of having to give in to her husband's wishes all this time. She says: “And now you got tuh die tuh find out dat you got tuh pacify somebody besides yo'self if you wants any love and any sympathy in dis world” (127). That is what she had done; complied with his demands, pushing back her own desires at the same time.

After the death of her second husband Janie tries to take stock of things: “She saw no reason to rush at changing things around. She would have the rest of her life to do as she pleased”(130). Further, as she lay in bed at night she started reflecting on her life and future: She asked if she wanted to leave and go back where she had come from and try to find her mother. Maybe tend her grandmother's grave. Sort of look over the old stamping ground generally. Digging around inside of herself like that she found that she had no interest in that seldom-seen mother at all. (130)

It is clear from Janie's reflections that she has no connection with her mother whom she does not recall seeing. She is forced to accept that it was her grandmother who had fulfilled that role in her life, but at the cost of her freedom. She had been treated like a piece of merchandise, she felt.

Much later Janie tries to tell her story to her friend Pheoby:

“Ah ain't never seen mah papa. And Ah didn't know 'im if Ah did. Mah mama neither. She was gone from round dere long before Ah wuz big enough tuh know. Mah grandma raised me. Mah grandma and de white folks she worked wid. She had a house out in de back-yard and dat's where Ah wuz born. They was quality white folks up dere in West Florida. Named Washburn. She had four gran'chillun on de place and all of us played together and dat's how come Ah never called mah Grandma nothin' but Nanny, 'cause dat's what everybody on de place called her. (40)

Living with Nanny Janie continued with her childhood—among the Washburns who were kind to them—till her grandmother decided that an independent dwelling place would give them some self respect. Accordingly, “Nanny didn’t love tuh see me wid mah head hung down, so she figgered it would be mo’ better fuh me if us had uh house. She got de land and everything and then Mis’ Washburn helped out uh whole heap wid things” (42). Janie recalls her youth and her awakening to an awareness of sex. But as she recalls, one innocent kiss exchanged over the gate was enough to convince Nanny that her granddaughter was ready for marriage.

When Janie tries to reason with her grandmother, the age gap and the gulf in their thinking is obvious:

“Dat’s what makes me skeered. You don’t mean no harm. You don’t even know where harm is at. Ah’m ole now. Ah can’t be always guidin’ yo’ feet from harm and danger. Ah wants to see you married right away.” (45)

Her grandmother believes that marriage will settle Janie’s problems, that all her youthful curiosity would be answered in time. Nanny is afraid that history would repeat itself and somebody would take advantage of Janie. Like the old woman that she is, Nanny can only think of Janie in terms of a liability to be safely delivered into a husband’s care before giving up her responsibility in that quarter. She tries cajoling and emotional blackmail till Janie gives in to her will. Nanny tells Janie that marriage lends security and social acceptability to a woman. She wants Janie to replace her fancy ideas about love and marriage and get get closer to the real. Before long she realizes her mistake and nanny her failure in her role as othermother.

At the age of forty, she once again marries a person named Virgilium ‘Tea Cake’ Woods who is much younger than herself. He respects her feelings and they share a kind of mutual understanding. Janie finds happiness with Tea Cake Woods. But her happiness lasts only for one and a half years, as Tea Cake dies of rabies after being bitten by a rabid dog. Janie had to kill her husband in order to save herself. With the end of Tea Cake’s life, Janie is exhausted and returns to her own place where she meets up with her friend Pheoby to whom she narrates her tale.

Thus Janie completes her journey to the horizon. She tries to prove her grandmother's idea of a secure and stable married life as futile but her own ideas prove to be equally so. Ironically, however, her search for such a life ultimately opens the door for her self-realization. She thinks that some of her failures are the result of her fight with her grandmother about seeking her own destiny.

### **Lina as other mother to Florens**

Lina in *A Mercy*, is over protective of Florens, who was neither her relative nor her neighbour. The story is set against the background of slavery during the seventeenth century and addresses the dilemma of slave mothers who are forced to part with their children who are sold off by their masters. As such, slave mothers were not allowed to protect or show motherly affection to their own children as they were governed by the rules of their masters.

In *A Mercy* slavery is used as the historical setting for the objectification of women, more particularly black women. The story of slavery has several trajectories of disabling and dehumanization. Slavery as an institution developed to protect the interest of the slave owner and the slave dealer. However, it historically expanded by annihilating families and life-worlds of hundreds of thousands of men and women. Apart from separating the slaves from their home and families by force and deception, often with the complicity of relatives and friends of these men and women.

Morrison is clear that slavery along with colonialism destroyed everything important associated with human life—family was one of the most significant casualties—in Africa. While black writers often legitimately look at the beginning of slavery in America, their stories do not always discuss its links with colonialism. In fact, Morrison looks at the conditions created by colonialism during the seventeenth century to support and indeed sustain slavery. Traders colonialists and mercenaries from Portugal, Spain, France and Britain maintained a complex network that overrode simple and straightforward considerations of military and territorial interests or conflicts. It is interesting to note that while English moneylenders financed Portuguese slave traders, French ships carried slaves from Africa and the West Indies to America in spite of national declarations and international agreements. In this world, stories of slavery therefore tend

to be told only in terms of broad-stroke narratives of slave trade and oppression of slave-owners.

The collusion of slave-dealers and colonial trade in procuring slaves from Africa and Indian settlements and in re-slaving freemen in some areas is not always documented. Morrison's *A Mercy* goes behind the history of slavery—both institutional and anti-institutional—to check the many unusual goings-on. But the most important story concerns Florens and her separation from her mother. It is not clear to Florens why her mother chose to give her away to Jacob Vaark. In addition to this act of giving her away—the sense of rejection and betrayal haunts her for the rest of her life—there is the question of not giving away—retaining is another word and has a different connotation—her baby brother.

The story of mothers and daughters circulates and mutates in the work of African American female writers with a regularity that is at once peripatetic and productive. The story travels with slavery in many ways. In Morrison's *A Mercy*, Florens and her mother lose each other to slavery. Florens is given away to Jacob Vaark by D'Ortega, her mother's owner and lover, as part of a business deal. It is not clear to Florens if her mother gave her away to save her from slavery or to save her male child from slavery. It is also not clear if her mother was complicit with D'Ortega in this deal in order to save her or to save whatever remains of D'Ortega's feelings for her. If the scene is reminiscent of a prayer—"Suddenly the woman smelling of cloves knelt and closed her eyes" (25)—it is interesting to note that a churchman is used to ferry Florens to her new destination. So the title of the novel resonates with multiple layers of irony and deception.

The journey from the arms of her unnamed biological mother—she is simply known as 'minha mae'—is to the protective gaze of Lina is eventful, though the story is told in several broken installments, each indicative of the tragedy and trauma of slavery. Vaark's household is unwelcoming: "Then Lina smiles when she looks at me and wraps me for warmth. Mistress looks away. Nor is Sorrow happy to see me" (6). Lina's warmth for Florens has a deep history that is not exactly personal. She is said to have "Mother hunger—to be one or to have one—both of them were reeling from that longing..." (63).

In other words, the loss or separation from a biological mother is the beginning of a new setting for a new kind of motherhood. The following instances will be helpful in putting Florens' knowledge of the world in context: The first one relates to the welcome. The extreme cold of New England and the terrible winter snow makes Florens think that she is in hell. She sees knives hanging from trees and houses, her way of describing sharp and tooth-shaped icicles. She is scared of the cold and of the unknown life ahead. The hurt from her separation is strong in her heart and memory:

Then Lina smiles when she looks at me and wraps me for warmth. Mistress looks away. Nor is Sorrow happy to see me. She flaps her hand in front of her face as though bees are bothering her. She is ever strange and Lina says she is once more with child. Father still not clear and Sorrow does not say. (18)

The education of Florens begins with her separation from her mother but is sustained by Lina. Lina teaches her that the important lesson in a woman's life concerns men. The mother perhaps had her reason to send her away from D'Ortega's household, possibly from the man himself. Florens' mother says that she sent her away because sooner or later she would be with men who would abuse her, with her without her will: 'There was no protection. None. Certainly not with your vice for shoes' (160). The fact that there is no difference between good men and bad men when it came to exploiting women, especially slaves, is a lesson that a slave woman learns at great cost to herself.

Interestingly, Florens' mother tries hard to pass on this knowledge to her in a coded language that she does not understand. She thinks that her mother traded her off by her own selfish thoughts of keeping the male child. She does not understand that a slave woman has little to choose from when it comes to her children. She can only hope and pray that once sold, they will go to a kind master. This lesson that men will be men—both white and black—is circulated directly and indirectly throughout the narrative. Jacob Vaark, the 'exceptional' man who Florens' mother thought was kind, turns out to be 'different' in that he has a secret history with women including Lina and Sorrow. This is a story that comes in instalments. The first instalment of the story is told very early, though never directly. It concerns Sorrow:



She is ever strange and Lina says she is once more with child. Father still not clear and Sorrow does not say. Will and Scully laugh and deny. Lina believes it is Sir's. Says she has her reason for thinking so. (6)

Elsewhere she says something even more revealing about Vaark, though the context makes it look like his shrewd business eye for business deals: 'Lina says Sir has a clever way of getting without giving. I know it because I see it forever and ever. Me watching, my mother listening, her baby boy on her hip' (5).

She thinks that her mother gave her away because she wanted to keep the boy. That hurts, and her memory spirals around the memory of rejection. But the recollection revolves around her early days at the Vaark household. Lina tells her—Lina tells her many things about life, women, men, slaves, animals, the world at large, as a mother would have told her—that Sorrow, the mongrelized woman, is pregnant. Lina suspects that Jacob is the father, and given Jacob's character, that is unusual:

When I ask what reason she says he is a man. Mistress says nothing. Neither do I. But I have a worry. Not because our work is more, but because mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand. (18; emphasis added)

The trauma of separation and the humiliation of being rejected is central to the narrative. Florens experiences pain and tragedy but often fails to connect them to her life, to life in general. In this sense the role played by Lina offers a perspective to Florens' life and experience, beginning with her separation from her mother. As already suggested, her mother's decision to give her away and retain her brother has a multi-layered and complex explanation. But the most important and striking explanation is not given in her story. It is available in the stories of others. In fact the most telling explanation is available in the episode where the blacksmith, who Florens considered her emotional and physical rescuer, chooses to look up Malaik, his foster-child, and let him hold his finger. The idea is that a boy and boy alone, not a girl, merits parental investment, whatever his worth, whether emotional or material.

This realization is ironical but true, and Morrison shows how slave trade and slavery have given a different and pressing context to the choice a parent may make at a crucial moment. Having said that, allowing the central characters any understanding of the world also requires nurturing and mothering. In this case it is Lina who offers Florens the much needed guidance and reflection. It is true that Florens does not have the language to clearly articulate Lina's role in her life. But there is no recollection or act involving her that somehow does not have this crucial phrase: 'Lina says.' This phrase needs a little elaboration, given the fact that it occurs in places where Florens needs to interpret experience, to convey her understanding or give an opinion. On the one hand, it suggests the depth of Lina's influence on Florens, even though the latter is not aware of it. The phrase is also a useful device to separate conflicting worldviews and narrative perspectives to mark each off from the perspectives of different characters.

When there is the question as to the identity of the father of Sorrow's child, it is Lina who says that Vaark (Master) is the most likely candidate. What is important here is the fact that Lina says this to Florens when Rebekka (Mistress) remains silent. The silence of Rebekka as opposed to Lina's words can be seen as the opposition of experience to understanding. Rebekka's gradual recognition of Vaark's alienation from the world he presided over is not stated though it is implied. The rise in Vaark's fortunes is linked to his shady business in rum and also marks the decline of the farm, due both to physical and emotional neglect. It is Lina who articulates this sense of foreboding to Florens.

In other words, the role played by Lina in Florens' education is unique and undeniable. One of the main points of reference is the sense of a woman's decorum, which interestingly starts from Lina's early obsession with shoes. As she grows up in the D'Ortega household, she hates remaining barefoot. In fact she begs around for shoes, not bothering about size and shape and fit. Her mother is sharp in her judgement, and foresees doom in this kind of 'prettify ways. Only bad women wear high heels. I am dangerous she says, wild but she relents and lets me wear the throwaway shoes from Senhora's house, pointy-toe, one raised heeklbroke, the other worn and a buckle on top.' (2).

Florens' mother dislikes the idea of her daughter wearing used and worn-out shoes. To her, used shoes symbolize discarded women or women with a low and marginal status. She also associates high-heeled shoes with loose women. More than that, she sees black

girls seeking to look pretty like white women as a dangerous sign, not only as a sign of parasitism. She knows from life around her that women who depend on men—whether for survival or for comfort—will sooner or later ruin themselves. Looking for shoes for ‘prettify ways’ will also soften a girl like Florens, a trait that will only make her a prey in the hands of predatory men, both black and white.

It is clear that she wants Florens to grow up in such a way that she is unworthy of male attention. For, trying to look good or beautiful has consequences. Only a mother could say this to a daughter without sounding jealous or ill-tempered. She is a witness to her own compromising position, given that she has to extend sexual favours to D’Ortega to keep herself safe and keep her family together. Shoes and softer feet will draw male attention. When she says her daughter is ‘dangerous,’ she actually means that her daughter is in danger. This love of shoes is not only prophetic but also marks shifts in the narrative. For example, even as Florens speaks of her shoes and how her mother—a *minha mae*—warned her about shoes, the most crucial lines come from Lina:

As a result, Lina says, my feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires. Lina is correct. Florens, she says, it’s 1690. Who else these days has the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady? (2/4)

The fact that her shoes make her feet tender makes her ‘special’ in an ironical way. So she draws the attention of men, of the blacksmith to start with. Lina sees the danger that a freed blackman cause in the lives of women, and tries to save Florens from blacksmith’s attention. She of course loses the battle, and much the same way that Florens’ mother had allowed her to wear used and borrowed shoes, she allows them to continue the relationship. This is an aspect of the relationship that also emerges in the narratives of Rebekka, Sorrow, Willard and Scully.

The narrative of the shoe and what Lina means to are joined only at the end when she is on her final mission to get the blacksmith to cure Rebekka.

So when I set out to find you, she [Lina] and Mistress give me Sir’s boots that fit a man not a girl. They stuff them with hay and oily corn husks and tell me to hide the letter inside my stocking—no matter the itch of the sealing wax. I am lettered

but I do not read what Mistress writes and Lina and Sorrow cannot. But I know what it means to say to any who stop me. (2/4)

The fact that she is given a letter hidden in her shoes as she is on a rescue mission is a compensatory gesture from her mother's story. While the separation from her mother and D'Ortega's world makes her an orphan, the women in the world of Jacob Vaark give her an identity. Most importantly, however, her journey in the forest and through the rivers entitles her to a new kind of status that boys were worthy of in the older world. While her meeting with the blacksmith does not turn out to be the perfect union that she had anticipated, she gets a sense of herself that she was not prepared for.

Lina and her mother were always trying to warn her against the fatal attraction of men. While the shoe episode sums up her mother's fear and distrust of men—all men—the fact that she loses her shoes at the end also coincides with her increasing self-dependence. It is clear that Mina Mae's [Florens' mother] act of giving her away to Vaark and Lina's training and protection saves Florens from men in general. Their mother love however is not enough to save her from her obsession with the blacksmith. She loses her shoes after her unwelcome skirmishes with Malaik in the blacksmith's cottage. While the loss of the shoes is a big blow to her, it also marks a moment of self-definition for her. In her last instalment Florens says something very significant: 'I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am trying to tell her. Mae, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress' (159).

Her feet harden as she leaves the blacksmith in a state of despair and anger. The blacksmith's rejection of her love is replete with sarcasm and maniacal male arrogance. He says that Florens is not only a slave but loves to be a slave. He not only refuses to accept that Florens broke Malaik's by accident but also hints that she is evil because she is black. As he denigrates her love and her body, he hits her. Florens hits back and a fight ensues before Florens injures the blacksmith and runs.

While the journey back home is not exactly a homecoming, she is tough in a different way as she returns. Willard and Scully are scared of her as she seems to be a feral woman now, a combination of Lina and Sorrow. She carries blood marks as she walks by the men, in what looks like a reversal of heroes returning home from battle. The fact that her baby brother was kept at home by their mother, while she was rejected, is dictated by

a mythological system where men are meant to protect communities. In the world of slavery, this applies only to the white male. For, the black boy will sooner or later become a black slave and serve the white male. He can neither protect his community or himself. So mina mae's fear for the girl child and preference for the male child are misplaced, distorted as they are by the history of slavery and slave trade.

It is to be noted that she kills a snake in the blacksmith's plot without too much fuss, primarily due to Lina's training. She knows the virtue of kindness and the unreasonable nature of human obsession of evil when she is with Widow Eatering and her daughter Jane. She retains images of her mother's last act, of Lina's first act of kindness that multiplies into full-scale protective bonding. The role played by Vaark in the lives of the two slave women who preceded his wife is never made explicit to the world outside but the women know. In spite of his protestations—'In Jacob Vaark's view, these were lawless laws encouraging cruelty in exchange for common cause, if not common virtue'—he is finally a white man who follows the instincts of white men before him. So Lina says:

They would forever fence land, ship whole trees to faraway countries, take any woman for quick pleasure, ruin soil, befoul sacred places and worship a dull, unimaginative god...Cut loose from the earth's soul, they insisted on purchase of its soil, and like all orphans they were insatiable...Lina was not so sure. Based on the way Sir and Mistress tried to run their farm, she knew there were exceptions to the sachem's revised prophecy. (52)

But more than this general, almost historical knowledge of the white man, Lina also knows and speaks to Florens about what she went through before Rebekka came as a newlywed. After her community was wiped out, she was abused by different men, and later sold out by the men who rescued her. She was clearly the mistress of Vaark's farm—'Hardy female, Christianized and capable of all matters domestic available for exchange of goods or specie' (50)—and the mistress of Vaark's heart before he got himself a wife. Later the wife and the old servant-lover together 'dulled the regret of the short-lived infants Lina delivered and buried each subsequent year' (50). The coming of the wife and the death of the children provides a brief interlude to Vaark's discreet but unmistakable claims on the women of the farm.

The arrival of Sorrow is greeted with disdain and distrust by the women. Each has her reasons to believe that Vaark has brought home a mongrelized girl-woman who will not demand much. Sorrow and Mistress and Lina do not ever openly discuss what they know of Vaark and of each other but Florens is privy to what the women have been through. During one of her annual her May baths, Rebekka is distracted and frightened by a moose and screams. Her husband comes out and this is what Lina says:

Sir steps out. Mistress stands up and rushes to him. Her naked skin is aslide with wintergreen. Lina and I looked at each other. What is she fearing, I ask. Nothing, says Lina. Why then does she run to Sir? Because she can, Lina answers. We never shape the world she says. The world shapes us. (69)

Lina of course sums up the position of the slave woman. She may be a lover, a pleasure giver, a producer of children who may or may not survive, but she can have no rights over the man. The wife has the rights to seek him out publicly. In other words, it is not just the blacksmith who can ruin the lives of girls like Florens but also kind looking men like Vaark who villainy never shows. This is not the reason why ‘a mina mae’ gave her away to Vaark. the education of Florens is complete only with her other mother.

A good example of this is available in Florens’ ‘address to the blacksmith’. Florens remembers how Lina and blacksmith compete in their own ways to teach Florens of the dangers of the world. the blacksmith teaches her about the dangers of wild men. As Florens remembers his words to the blacksmith:

What about the boneless bears in the valley? Remember? How when they move their pelts sway as though there is nothing underneath? Their smell belying their beauty, their eyes knowing us from when we are beasts also. You telling me that is why it is fatal to look them in the eye. They will approach, run to us to love and play which we misread and give back fear and anger. (3)

On the contrary Lina speaks of dangers from all men, not just wild and untamed men: ‘Giant birds also are nesting out there bigger than cows, Lina says...’ (3). Lorens adds: ‘... and not all natives are like her, she says, so watch out’ (3). This is Lina’s remarks about Sorrow: ‘A praying savage, neighbours call her, because she is once churchgoing yet she bathes herself every day and Christians never do’ (3). Sorrow manages to keep her last child alive by keeping out of the farm at the right time, relying on Scully and

Willard to help her deliver the baby. What is clear from this account is the fact that any woman who delivered a child on Vaark's farm, especially after Rebekka's arrival, had to let go of the child. The child was possibly buried or let out into the river, and the mother could not do a thing. Finally, Sorrow decides to change her name and call herself 'Complete'. This is the complete education of Florens.

At the end, Florens survives Vaark as she is sheltered by the three women together. In the first case, her mother sheltered her by giving herself to D'Ortega. her other mother(s) sheltered her from Vaark and gave her life's lessons, though not always with love and compassion. Lina taught her farm skills, hunting, and survival skills. Sorrow guards her from Willard and Scully, and tells her of the dangers on the farm and off it. It is Rebekka who sends her to fetch the blacksmith, and in the process gives her the much-needed recognition as a son would have been recognized. It is ironical that Rebekka, whose acts teach her to be tough and hardy, prepares to marry somebody from the village, possibly after selling the farm and one of the two women who can be dispensed with. The bonding between a slave and her owner is never secure.

It is not Lina however, who teaches her the last lesson in life, something very vital in a woman's relationship to man. It is Sorrow who says this: 'A lion who thinks his mane is all. A she lion who does not. I learn this from Daughter Jane. Her bloody legs do not stop her. She risks. Risks all to save the slave you throw out' (158). This last session is one of survival and risk-taking. This involves fighting to the finish if necessary. So she attacks the blacksmith when he rejects her and ridicules her love. She knows that she can hunt, she can take care of a farm and of men like Vaark.

Interestingly, while all her lessons are mostly from Lina, she does not teach her how to fight. The lesson to fight, to give and take blood, comes from Jane, the girl who is feared to be a devil-child. She helps Florens escape from possible incarceration. She gives her boiled eggs and a blanket, and when Florens asks her if she is a demon, she blinks and says yes. In fact, Jane is the future other mother, ready if not yet prepared to fight for girls and teach girls to fight for survival. Lina and Sorrow and Jane therefore are extraordinary other mothers who supplement the lessons begun by a biological mother.

Lindy as othermother to Maxine in *Singing in the Comeback Choir*

Lindy takes care of her granddaughter Maxine after the death of her estranged daughter Millicent when the child was six. Millicent's husband had died in Vietnam when Maxine was a small child. Millicent had not forgiven her mother for pursuing her career as a singer at the cost of her marriage. She had hated travelling from place to place while her mother performed on stage. When Lindy comes for Maxine after her daughter's death, Maxine does not know her well as she had met her a few times only. "Lindy flew into her life like an exotic firebird"(35). When Lindy embraces Maxine she "whispers " 'Grandma,' with the conviction of a child who'd found her way home"(Singing 36). Lindy's reply is equally reassuring: "Lindy's got you now" (36). Even as Lindy and Maxine mourn the death of Millicent, they start bonding together as Lindy goes all out to make Maxine happy. Years later Maxine tells her husband of Lindy's kindness to her:

"As soon as I moved in with her, she painted my room pink....With a pink rug and pink curtains. She went out and bought all these dolls, more dolls than I'd ever seen in my life" (37).

Lindy continued to indulge Maxine: the latter wanted and got bunk beds to accommodate her school friends staying overnight.

As Maxine gets to know Lindy she realizes that her grandmother was not an ordinary person in life and in her music: "She always preferred the difficult arrangements, jumping from major to minor chords and back....The easy way wasn't her way. Maxine's most vivid memories were of a woman who sustained the note as long as her breath held out" (31). So Lindy continued to balance her singing with taking care of Maxine till she felt compelled to tell her grandmother that she did not need constant looking after. It was then that Lindy tells her that because she was growing up she needed someone who would look out for her.

Maxine recalls going to school with her grandmother: "And when the bell rang at three o'clock, her grandmother was always waiting for her by the fence if she was in town. If not she walked home with Peaches, or Darvelle and Mercedes came to get her." This shows the support of the neighbours and the community in taking care of children. There



are instances when Lindy returns the compliment and looks after her neighbour's grandchildren, Kane and Able, when their grandmother has to go to hospital for dialysis. Maxine recalls that most of the families on Sutherland Street had come from the South in search of work and the Black community values had continued with them in the North.

Her grandmother ensured that Maxine not only attended school but that she did some reading every day. They borrowed a book from the library daily and after Maxine had completed her homework, her grandmother would ask her to read out a story to her. Lindy kept her company as she did her homework, reading the newspapers. Finally Lindy started studying with her and found that Maxine's course was too easy for her. She even persuaded the Headmaster to promote Maxine to a higher class where Maxine managed to cope with the harder coursework. Lindy, however, continued to press on with Maxine's education and by the time she was ten, her grandmother had her out of that school.

Years later Maxine looks back at her grandmother's efforts on her behalf:

“I was ten years old, taking two buses to a school in Chestnut Hill, this suburb where I was the only black child in my sixth-grade class and one of five in the entire school. Talk about culture shock” (45).

When her friends wanted to know how Lindy had managed to get her admitted into that kind of school Maxine tells them:

“Her manager and his family lived out there. He signed some papers that said he was my legal guardian, so when the school authorities tried to mess with me, we whipped out the documents. Not only that, she got three of my girlfriends into the school too. Her manager said, ‘Lindy how many colored kids can I be the guardian of?’” (45)

Lindy's reply was to ask him if he didn't have any friends, who could help out. Such was the strength and enthusiasm that she brought to her projects. Not only was she concerned about her granddaughter but also her friends' welfare. Lindy also ensured that the Black girls in that White school had their own support group.

Lindy continued to look out for Maxine. They shifted to Sutherland street when Maxine was nine years old. One evening when she was accosted by some of the girls in the neighbourhood, Lindy joined them and invited them all to her place. When Maxine asks her how she knew about her being in trouble, Lindy just tells her “Don’t you worry about how I know....You just remember that I got my eyes on whatever you’re doing”(49). After that things were all right for Maxine with the neighbourhood children. When Lindy was recording there was always a crowd of musicians around her in the house:

who came to practice for their weekend gigs or jam for the fun of it. When Lindy was still recording, Maxine would sit in studios for hours while her grandmother sang into a microphone, and then come home to a house full of music and loud laughter.(32-3)

Things however changed when Lindy’s singing career ran into trouble: “as Lindy’s work dried up, most of her musician friends dropped out of their lives” (33). She did a lot of things as Maxine recalls. She was eleven and “Lindy could no longer pretend she had a singing career. Things were so bad that they wore coats in the house for two weeks in February and lit candles in the dark. Darvelle, Mercedes and other neighbours brought food to them, and Maxine still recalled the strained look on her grandmother’s face each time she had to borrow a few dollars from one of them. (31)

It was the support of the resilient Black community that made it possible for them to survive. Things went from bad to worse as Lindy did not work for months and when she did sing for a night in a night club, the manager refused to pay her. When Lindy asked for money he laughed in her face. The effect of this was that both Lindy and Maxine sat without speaking in the car which was round the corner. Then Lindy started the car and turned on the headlights after which she removed the car jack from the boot. “When Maxine heard a loud crash, she knew that the big picture window of Don’s Underground was no more. Seconds later Lindy ran around the corner, jumped into the car and they took off” (32). As Maxine recalls revenge was only temporarily sweet as they had more serious things on their mind. “That winter Lindy and Maxine ate beans every day. Lindy apologized to her constantly” (32). However, there was little relief as there was nothing on offer for Lindy.

As Lindy kept hoping some singing assignment would come up, her friend and neighbor Mercedes who forced her to face reality:

“You have to face facts, Lindy. You’re not making it singing anymore. You have to raise this child. Go back to school. Take up something that’s going to give you benefits. Nursing might be good. Then when the singing starts up again, you can go back to it.”(32)

Lindy took up nursing and Maxine believed that her friends like Bootsy must have paid for her training. After Lindy became a nurse and got a job at a local hospital, “they had to watch their money carefully, a contrast to the days when she was working regularly at any number of clubs” (32). This shows the efforts made by Lindy to provide for Maxine’s nurture. That she, a performing artist, has to change course midstream or as a grandmother and look for a profession that will leave her with some funds and a lot of self respect, points to the resilience of Lindy’s character. She is kind and self-sacrificing but she is not above showing anger and or calling upon the support of her numerous men friends.

Although Lindy assured Maxine that “she loved being a practical nurse, Maxine didn’t believe her. There was no joy in her grandmother’s eyes when she trudged off to work, no spark when she dragged herself home at night” (33). Instead of not working and living on social security, Lindy prefers to work as a nurse which was extremely taxing to anybody not used to it till middle age. But Lindy does it for her granddaughter more than herself. Without consciously doing it Lindy appears to fit into the role of an othermother. Not only does she take care of Maxine daily physical and emotional needs, she also fulfills the role of the transmitter of culture in the sense that she tries to reconstruct Maxine’s family history through the pictures on her walls. There were photographs of Maxine at different stages of growing up, of her parents, of her mother and herself after the death of her father. Looking at the images Maxine could almost hear her mother’s voice although she had never been there. It was as if “Lindy had made her childhood whole,” as she recalls her father’s death when she was five, a year after he had gone to Vietnam, to be followed by her mother’s death a few months later (87). As Maxine looks around she spots a picture of herself and “Lindy with her arm around Maxine’s thin

shoulders as if she were trying to anchor her”(87). The photo told its own story: Lindy was always there for her.

When Maxine was sixteen she remembers Lindy removing the photographs from the wall in anger:

“Dammit it to hell,” she yelled, yanking the photos off the wall....When she was finished, she sat down on the sofa and lit a cigarette. After a few puffs, she turned to a dazed Maxine and said, “You’re coming out of that church choir. And you will go to college if I have to scrub floors to get you there.” (89)

Lindy was no doubt signalling the end of her singing career and ensuring that Maxine had no aspirations in that quarter, because of the heartbreak involved. She had after all left her husband to pursue her singing career, and in her late middle age she is made to realize that she cannot expect to compete with the new singers and the kind of music they were popularizing at that time. It also points to Lindy’s determination to send Maxine to college so that she is better equipped to handle life.

More than twenty years later, Bootsie tells Maxine what it meant to Lindy to stop singing:

“I remember a couple of years before Lindy quit for good. She was down. And it wasn’t just the money. When you got a gift like she has and won’t nobody let you use it, it’s like a death.”(150)

Bootsie also tells Maxine of the swindle perpetrated on them by the recording company and by Milt their agent: “We signed every piece of paper those white folks put in front of us. We gave away what we should have sold, chasing music when we shoulda been chasing the dollar”(151). This explains why they had no money when their public singing ended. Lindy not only felt let down by the public, they were also betrayed by their business partners. There was also an element of racism behind that fraud as Bootsie observes: “back then a white man in the music business had to be some kinda saint not to cheat black folks. And Milt wasn’t no saint” (152). By the time they discovered the

fraud, their careers were nearly over. Lindy had to live with all this as she tried to stay afloat to provide for Maxine.

With hindsight Bootsy observes that maybe, the ending of their performing career was not so bad for Lindy as she had other commitments:

“And maybe that was just as well, because the other part of it was that she wanted to raise you right. Being on the road, it wasn’t right for a little girl. Sometimes, when she’d take you with her, she could tell that you were tired, and then she didn’t want you in some of them places....She felt bad about what happened with Millicent, her always being with baby-sitters. Millicent was mad with her after she grew up. Stayed mad. She didn’t want you hating her too.” (152)

This shows that more than the performing it was the swindle depriving her of her income, that hurt Lindy more. At a time when she would have preferred to cut down on her travelling and stay at home looking after Maxine, she had to go out looking for work not related to anything she was familiar with. Despite the setbacks, Lindy displays the resilience of the Southern Black woman who puts up with the challenges coming her way, with a resolute spirit and resilience as she provides for the child in her care.

Thus this chapter looks into different kinds of othermothers from the times of slavery to contemporary times. While it is often the resilience of a community that provides othermothers, sometimes women are catapulted into situations where they find themselves caring for a child or children, without the tradition in the background. Some of these othermothers are simple women extending care to someone in need like Nanny and Janie or Lina and Florens, at others they may be as colourful as Lindy.

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