"My Soul Is A Witness"

Reimagining African American Women's Spirituality and the Black Female Body in African American Literature

Edited by
Carol E. Henderson

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Editor

Carol E. Henderson

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About the Editor

Carol E. Henderson (Ph.D.) is the Vice Provost for Diversity and Inclusion, Chief Diversity Officer, and Advisor to the President at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, and is Professor Emerita of English and Africana Studies at the University of Delaware. The recipient of several community, professional, and research awards, including the University of Delaware's Excellence in Teaching Award, she has been an educator, teacher, and scholar for over twenty-five years. The author/editor of four books and numerous essays in critical volumes and journals, she has also been Special Issue editor for four journals: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS), Middle Atlantic Writers Association (MAWA), the Journal of American Culture (JAC), and Religions. She has a forthcoming article, "All Eyez on Me: On Being Black, Female, and a First-Gen Leader in the Academy" in a Special Issue of Palimpsest on Black women, leadership, and academic service (2021). She is currently working on an article that examines James Baldwin's influence on writers Ta-Nehisi Coates and Jesmyn Ward.

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Editorial

Between Self and Spirit: Mapping the Geographies of Black Women's Spirituality

Carol E. Henderson

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> *"There wasn't enough for Indigo in the world she'd been born to, so she made up what she needed."*
>
> —Ntozake Shange
> *sassafrass, cypress, and indigo*

> *" . . . the Spirit, or spirituality, defies definition—a fact that speaks to its power as much as it reflects its mystery."*
>
> —Gloria Wade-Gayles
> *My Soul is a Witness*

I love the character of Indigo. She has to be one of the most unique female child characters in African American literature. A child of few words, Indigo creates her own world because "there wasn't enough for Indigo in the world she'd been born to" (Shange 1982). She is shaped by author Ntozake Shange as a girl-child who had a "moon in her mouth". Wise beyond her years, complex in spirit, Indigo embodies folk and ancestral culture, a spiritual reorientation of Black feminine consciousness personified in the many dolls that become her community of witnesses, her vocal expressions of defiance, protection, agency, and empowerment when the world seemed too big for her, and words were not adequate enough to speak into existence that which she needed. Made of and filled with cotton root bark, comfrey leaves, and dried sunflowers, Indigo's dolls—Jamaican, Caribbean, and American—weave past and present into a creative interrogation of the intertextualities of collective African identities. Shange's critical intervention—a practice that, at once reaffirms and yet destabilizes ineffectual discourses that efface resistive narratological frameworks in Black women's literatures—resituates divine Black feminine consciousness in a literary methodology that moves the margins to the center. Shange's text calls into question the ways Black women's bodies become written texts—marked by racism, sexism, colorism, and otherism. Yet they are spiritual beings, nonetheless. Shange's novel utilizes creativity—weavers, dancers, midwives—as symbolic linkages of culture, community, and history. And just as Indigo's spiritual offerings become her four-foot tall dolls whose arms she crawls into to find soul comfort, Shange develops another "Creation story" where Black women become the center of her universe and recipes, rituals, dream stories, and letters the beatitudinal moorings that anchor Gullah/Geechee mores at the center of her narrative.

This special collection seeks to explore the ways in which writers reclaim the Black female body in African American literature using the theoretical, social, cultural, and religious frameworks of spirituality and religion. In order to more fully consider the ways Black women have spiritually represented themselves and their bodies in African American literature, one must consider, as Katherine Clay Bassard reminds us, a variety of religious traditions that shape their religious experiences, including Christianity, Islam, African and neo-African traditional, among others (Bassard 1999). This practice of interpreting Black women's intertextuality (what Bassard terms *spiritual interrogation*) structures visions of reading that provide a richer understanding of the ways in which the sacred and secular, the spiritual and political, become a lens through which to see African American female subjectivity in all of its

nuanced complexity. This collection critically engages these ways of knowing as it simultaneously enters into conversation with other collections who have done this work in notable fashion (Henderson 2014; Hopkins and Pinn 2004; Weir-Soley 2009; West 2012). Of key importance to this current collection is Black women's agency within these realms—acknowledged and affirmed in prose, poetry, essays, speeches, written plays, or short stories. Whether it is Indigo (*sassafrass*, *cypress, and indigo*) creating a world with her dolls that shepherds her through her rite of passage to womanhood, or Baby Suggs declaring in her "fixing ceremonies" in the Clearing that "in this here place, we flesh" (Morrison 1988), authors have sought to discuss the tensions of the sacred and secular through concepts such as forgiveness, redemption, passion, alienation, motherhood, sex, marriage, just to name a few.

In "Are You Sure, Sweetheart, That you Want to Be Well?" **Belinda Waller-Peterson** considers mental illness, the journey to wholeness, and its ties to Black women's spirituality in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*. Navigating the complex realities of a mental health crisis which manifests itself in an attempted suicide, *Salt Eaters'* central character, Velma, finds her life on the edge of a figurative cliff. Spiritual isolation, the tensions of physical/psychic/emotional vulnerability, and the physical loss of a baby exacerbate this body in pain. Velma's sojourn to mental wellness, as Waller-Peterson argues, then becomes an interactive process that involves community, a spiritual guide, Minnie, and womb-like healing spaces/places informed by spiritual and cultural modes of knowing that hold the essence of ancestral alternative healing practices. Minnie, in particular, accesses these healing rituals through psychic and physical touch, "stepping into the body to listen to it to bring the body/patient in alignment [through] the use of touch, hearing, voice, music to expose its [the body's] abnormalities". Minnie's question to Velma, "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" recognizes self-creation and one's own agency in actualizing a path to wellness—a liberatory and political act of resistance, as bell hooks has said elsewhere (hooks 1989). Central to Waller-Peterson's discussion is the collective healing that allows others the permission to heal themselves. These community witnesses, many of them wounded storytellers themselves, join Velma in a communal act of affirmation that embraces an inheritance of love and self-care rooted in truth-telling.

Keith Byerman, in "Talking Back: Phillis Wheatly, Race, and Religion", re-engages the import of Wheatley's work in the moral conversation of evangelical Christianity in her 1773 collection *Poems of Various Subjects, Religious and Moral.* As Byerman reminds us, much has been written on Wheatley's interplays with the future Thomas Jefferson. In *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), Jefferson questions the veracity of Wheatley's work—its intellectual depth, its dignity, its composition. Wheatley's counterarguments to Jefferson's inhumane rhetorics situate themselves not only in the ways she manages her inquisition by the elite of white society, but also in the technical framings of her portrait and the religious threads interwoven into her literary works. Her portrait, meditative and pensive, dignified and regal, positions the Black female body in what Maurice Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith (Wallace and Smith 2012) call "the making of African American Identity". Pictorial image-making then becomes a way to shift visual literacy in ways that establish the material utility of the written (book of poetry) and the embodied text. By connecting the experiences of people of African heritage to the biblical stories of bondage and freedom, grief and mourning, redemption and spiritual enlightenment to, as Byerman concludes, "take on the giants", Wheatley "gains some control over the representation of herself and her race".

In "Looking Foreword to Milton in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*", **Reginald Wilburn** traces the intertextual threads of Miltonic influences that find resonance in Morrison's novel *Paradise*. According to Wilburn, Morrison converts Milton into "tropological vernacular" through her revisionist interplay of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Starting with Milton's conceptualization of the concepts of paradise, heaven, hell, and what it means to be a "fallen woman", Morrison extends the critical lens of these discussions to perform a spiritual interrogation of Milton's narrative that reclaims Eve's pre-eminence as the first mother of humankind. Within the terrain of other spiritual and religious expressions—tenets Morrison puts in conversation with Christian theology and its religious practices—Morrison complicates the Eve aesthetic, creating pathways that nestle Eve's progenic lineage in the textures of a Black womanist

ideology. More than just racializing Eve, Morrison extends the "many faces of Eve" moniker to trouble the sublime and disrupt the customary twinning rudiments of good/evil, black/white, male/female. In *Paradise*, Eve becomes several women in the Convent whose very presence disrupts male authority in the all Black town of Ruby. The brutality enacted upon the women in the Convent serves as a way to "reassert a particular order", explains Wilburn, a way to control "wicked bodies" deemed "antithetical to conventions of true womanhood". Much as Milton's pen sought to do violence to Eve by minimizing her presence in *Paradise Lost*, Morrison's recovery project includes not only restoring the humanity of the women in the Convent, but also "rupturing racial language as an emancipating discourse of freedom", in Wilburn's estimation. The divine is symbolized in the gifts each woman possesses as the lives they live become the sermons they preach. This is the power of Morrison's *Paradise*. In gaining a greater understanding of themselves, the women in the Convent allow the reader to reimagine the translatory tenets of redemption, restoration, and spiritual intimacy—not as weapons of perversion or exclusion, but as mechanisms for a resurrection of a different sort. In this space, paradise is reimagined in the here and now as the spirit takes flight, surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who lose the binds of captivity to teach a different liberation gospel.

In "Spiritual Eroticism and Real Good Loving in Tina McElroy Ansa's *The Hand I Fan With*", **Georgene Bess Montgomery** lays bare the complex relationship Black women have had with the church. Caught between the polar binaries of virgin and whore, Black women have had to "internalize the shame of sex and uphold the mantle of chasteness", according to Montgomery. Using her own personal narrative as a prologue to the discussion, Montgomery speaks in powerful terms about her Pentecostal upbringing "which informed her notions of a woman's place and the cost of embracing sexual pleasure". These themes are continued in her examinations of Black women's texts as varied as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* to Gloria Naylor's *Women of Brewster Place*. It is here, that Montgomery ascertains, Black women embrace their whole selves in an enjoyment of love, life, and sex, even if it means, as was the case with Alice Walker's Shug Avery, one is disowned by their religious family. Yet it is the attention that Montgomery directs to Ntozake Shange's *sassafrass, cypress, and indigo* that offers an alternative lens through which to see not only the Black woman's physical body—but the spiritual essence of that body. Grounding her interrogations of Black women's spirituality in African deities Shango, Oshun, Oya, and Elegua, Montgomery reveals Shange's alternative narrative that "where there is woman, there is magic". Because the traditional avenues of spiritual expression portend a spiritual woman that is pious, quiet, submissive, and pure—a godly woman also bound by the curse of Eve whose sinful desires in the Garden of Eden manifest themselves in her menstrual cycle—Shange counters this narrative through a ritual of rose petals, a wearing of a garland of flowers, and a blessing that embraces one's sensuality as an extension of beauty, love, and harmony. Montgomery's focus on African cosmology broadens evaluations of the Black woman's body and spirituality to include the ways in which Oshun as "deity of beauty and sensuality spiritualizes lovemaking". This spiritualization is not bound by religious parameters but is tied to the sensory elements of eroticism inhabitant in the flesh as a way that reclaims one's spiritual connection through joy and the pleasures of an intimate, orgasmic union of two people. Anchoring her discussion in Tina McElroy's *The Hand I Fan With*, Montgomery's focus on ghosts, cauls, familial legacies, and protagonist Lena's otherworld power reminds us that spiritual transformation, in McElroy's novel, is beautifully tied to loving one's complete self either through the act of lovemaking—or the sensual ecstasy of affirming one's spirit self and her gifts. It is here that the magic is found, and the heart, spirit, and the body sing.

In "Set Thine House in Order: Black Feminism and the Sermon as Sonic Art in *The Amen Corner*", **Melanie R. Hill** examines the figure of the Black preacher. Leading with W.E.B. DuBois's analysis in "Of the Faith of Our Fathers", Hill discusses how the performativity of the preacher "renders the Black body visible in a period where Black people and everything that characterized them were deemed invisible". It is in preaching The Word that moral authority is granted, and leadership and spiritual power become refigured in the prayers, songs, shouts, and dances that amplify spiritual freedom over oppression and captivity. What is important in Hill's discussion is the way the Black church has

overwhelmingly figured the preacher as Black and male, and in the canonical scholarship of the early twentieth century, these characterizations have translated into an undervaluation of the Black woman preacher. Hill asserts that recentering the preacher as a Black woman would require a re-envisioning of the Black woman in religious discourse to more fully understand the experiential impact of her presence within the sacred agenda of the Black experience. James Baldwin's first play, *The Amen Corner* (1954), situates this discussion in the Civil Rights Movement, and the textures of *Brown v. Board of Education I and II.* According to Hill, at a time when the Black male preacher was synonymous with The Movement, Baldwin troubles that social view through his rendering of Margaret Alexander, the central figure in *Amen Corner*.

Maurice O. Wallace in "'Precious Lord': Black Mother-Loss and the Roots of Modern Gospel" returns the spiritual lens of interrogation to Thomas Dorsey's iconic 1932 gospel song *Take My Hand, Precious Lord*. Of key concern to Wallace is the spectral bodies of a Black mother and child (Dorsey's wife Nettie and child) that haunt the lyrics of this song. Dorsey's wife, Nettie, dies during childbirth, and two days later, their son dies as well. As Wallace sees it, "the larger history of black maternal and infant mortality" undergirds the grief expressed in this song. This grief is simultaneously rooted at the intersections of death, Black motherhood, and the racial politics of women's reproductive health care. Each becomes diminished "except that ... an alternative history of the modern gospel sound, one that helps African American religious and musical histories see and hear better what we might call, with the deepest debt to Emily Lordi, 'black feminist resonance' in early and late black musical production by black women and men." In short, if Dorsey has been seen as the father of gospel, we must also imagine his wife Nettie Dorsey as the unspoken mother of gospel, and her tragic journey at childbirth, a Black social mourning song of loss. Moreover, as Wallace contends, *Precious Lord* realizes "a black womanist structure of feeling, intensely and excessively sonified" in ways that hauntingly "gave new birth, mother and child, to black religious music". It is the visual spectacle of mother and child in a lace-laden casket, however, that provides an opportunity for communal witnessing and grieving that conjures up and re-presents, as Karla F.C. Holloway states elsewhere (Holloway 1997), a persistent lament for a departed body. These rituals make sure we do not forget—that we remember these narratives and the conditions surrounding their dying. What Wallace reminds us is that *Precious Lord*, in its own way, is a mooring place—a cultural memorial to the racial circumstances of Jim Crow that impacted Nettie Dorsey and Thomas Jr.'s dying. And although gospel and its remnants frame the rhythm of *Precious Lord*, it is the resonance of the cries sung in the somber notes of this iconic piece that ushers forth, as Wallace states, the "the mournful expressions of black women's spiritual consciousness".

In "Rewriting Race, Gender and Religion in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise*", **Heather Hathaway** considers Morrison's creative process for establishing women as spiritual agents in her narrative. Acutely aware of the strictures of orthodox Christian systems, Morrison's womanist theology gestures towards a reframing of African American religious expression that not only shows Christianity's indelible mark on the lives of Black people, but also shows the ways they have reshaped its social orders to carve out a sort of postmodern spiritualism innately divine, political, and persuasive. Hathaway, in particular, points to Morrison's use of biblical language, irony, inversion, and revision, specifically in *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise*, to preach a principled way of being that lays bare the misogynistic underpinnings of orthodox Christianity. Instead, Morrison "offers female spiritual leaders, grounded in mercy, communal wholeness, and love" as surrogates for a womanist epistemology. Morrison's characters, Lena (short for the biblical Magdalene), First Corinthians, Hagar, Pilate, and Ruth become instructive tools to provide a kind of wisdom about belonging, affirmation, religiosity, and spiritual divinity. And, as Hathaway determines, Morrison's use of Gnosticism directs attention to this alternate spiritual belief that stresses the divine within each woman, her journey to redemption, self-knowledge, and self-forgiveness. Such explorations also reveal how one's spiritual sojourn leads to larger queries centered on one's quest for true citizenship, freedom, and identity.

In "Christianity's Last Stand: Visions of Spirituality in Post-1970s African American Women's Literature", **Trudier Harris** charts the pivotal moments in African American literature where Black women authors begin to question the preeminence of Christianity as the only religious belief system in the African American experience. Using the relationship of Beneatha and Lena Younger in Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* as a guide, Harris explains how Beneatha's questioning of the idea of God serves as a turning point—the last stand in African American literature—because "Mama Lena can force a recitation, but she cannot force belief" after she slaps her daughter across the face for saying "There simply is no blasted God—there is only man and it is he who makes miracles!" In one of the most iconic scenes in the play, Mama Lena makes Beneatha recite through tears, "In my mother's house there is still God." Hansberry's work was a precursor to the Black Arts Movement and the Black Aesthetic, whose reconceptualization of the spiritual is rooted in the mystical and transformative tenets of Africa and its belief systems. Forays into the work of Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange, Toni Cade Bambara, Octavia Butler, Jewelle Gomez, among other writers, emphasize the values that undergird these spiritual communities, the special bonds of relationship, and the noteworthy tools of the supernatural. The sway of immortality, the reliance on fields of writing—science fiction, speculative, and horror—allow these authors to stretch the dialogue of spirituality beyond the traditional. As Harris concludes, the very heavy presence of African American women in Black congregations, whose leadership does not reflect their diversity, portends a historical reckoning. "Overburdened black women in churches throughout the United States could learn a thing or two from their literary sisters," writes Harris. Indeed, African American literature offers an avenue to interrogate these restrictive patriarchal spaces.

In a poignant meditation on the lived narratives of early African American women, **Elizabeth West** reminds us in her essay, "Community and Naming: Lived Narratives of Early African American Women's Spirituality", that community is spirit, and it is this spirit that influences African American women's acts of self-actualizations accessed through group affinity and "a collective spiritual corpus". Bound by an African ethos that affirms one's humanity and soul, early Africans naming practices rested in Nommo, the divine power to create and recreate self through a process of unnaming and naming. These acts of self-agency presented themselves in the invention of names that embodied one's enslaved and freed histories and reveal themselves in the "epistemological and spiritual ethos that early Africans transported to their diasporic communities". These declarations of self-empowerment find remnants in the stories of Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth as West reiterates and are notably present in those individuals who choose African and Muslim names for themselves and their progeny. These practices are themselves "a narrative trail of their existence and their family's history", and encourage us to rethink that which is not just written but is unconventional within the narratological space. Using one of Alice Walker's underappreciated short stories, "Everyday Use", West recalls the spiritual threads that manifest themselves in quilt making, and how this cultural tradition is itself an archival tool whose artifactual creation records familial and communal histories and identities in the patches of the quilt itself—its interconnectedness binding the past to the present. In a similar fashion, West directs attention to the secular and sacred—the body and the spirit—in her examination of Beyoncé's *Lemonade* and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. Building upon the critical work of Kinitra Brooks and Kameelah Martin, West draws linkages between Beyoncé's creative nod to Dash, and the multidimensional narratological tenets that tie Black women's spiritual recovery of womanist history to the intellectual paradigms of Black folk parables, music, and dance. These "generational beliefs, practices, and ways of knowing ... if pieced together or sampled, can breathe life into black women's muted narratives from generations past". Such an examination allows West to recover the narrative of Francis Sistrunk (b.~1822), a descendant in her own mother's genealogical line. Powerfully weaving archival records, the 1840 US census, and kinship networks, a fuller picture of West's family emerges as Sistrunk's children and her descendants "become living archives of her life". As West declares, "Francis Sistrunk was re-discoverable in the 21st century because she left defining markers in the pieces

of her life". These pieces include Sistrunk's naming practices of her sons in her lineage that allow her to be the architect of her family's place in familial history.

Some Concluding Remarks[1]

When I was asked by *Religions* to serve as a guest editor to a Special Issue on Black women's bodies and spirituality, I was honored to accept the task. My body of work has continuously paid homage to Black women's creative gifts—their uncanny ability to invent and reinvent themselves in ways that make known their spiritual strivings—their complex existence within social and cultural spaces that frame them as both outsider and insider, unworthy and worthy, deviant and sacred, excess and minimal. In the world of religious and spiritual entanglements, these ties that bind become all the more tenuous. As Tamura Lomax asserts in *Jezebel Unhinged*, "I learned that the Black Church and black popular culture influence each other, especially in their omnipresent circulating discourse of black womanhood." Indeed, as she goes on to point out, "this discourse of 'truth' can be just as death dealing, anxiety inducing, and dehumanizing as white supremacist discourse on race" (Lomax 2018). The intent of this current collection is to demonstrate that angst, and to point out how Black women's narratives—whether physical, embodied, written, creatively strung together, danced, or sung—are themselves a testament to Black women's resilience as they answer the call to serve as witnesses—and participants—in the spiritual sojourn of Black people in this country.

That call extends, as well, into our current social moment of racial reckoning with the egregious violence directed at Black bodies—brutalized, suffocated, maimed, and surveillanced—in live and living color before our eyes. The murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Atatiana Jefferson, Rayshard Brooks, Botham Jean, Ahmaud Arbrey, and countless others too numerous to name here, have made it excruciatingly clear how some value Black people in this country. This unconscionable realization, intertwined with a global pandemic that adversely impacts African American, Native, Indigenous, and Latinx communities in disproportionate numbers, amplifying the inequities and injustices prevalent in health care systems, social services, employment, and housing, grieves our souls, wounds our spirits, and invades our mental and spiritual wellness. It would seem odd to close this collection without acknowledging that. And so I do. I pay homage to Jesmyn Ward, who in her beautifully haunting eulogy to her beloved husband, and the father of her children, makes palpable the pain and grief of witnessing—the textures of its trauma and its respair (Ward 2020). I make room for her tears here ... her revelations ... her healing ... and ours.

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[1] I am extremely grateful to the scholars who contributed essays to this special collection. Their wisdom, critical insight, astute analyses, and gracious collegiality made this collection all that it is. The numerous scholars who served as readers to these essays are essential contributors to this current work. Their generosity is gratefully acknowledged here. As well, I would like to thank the wonderful editorial staff at *Religions* who have been invaluable in seeing this project to its end. Your guidance through every step of the process was a breath of fresh air. Thank you for believing in us and the import of this current work.

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Article

"Are You Sure, Sweetheart, That You Want to Be Well?": The Politics of Mental Health and Long-Suffering in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*

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Abstract: In analyzing the woman-centered communal healing ceremony in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, this article considers how these types of womb-like spaces allow female protagonists to access ancestral and spiritual histories that assist them in navigating physical illnesses and mental health crises. It employs Bell Hooks' *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* alongside Arthur Kleinman's definition of illness as social and transactional to demonstrate that the recognition of illness, and the actualization of wellness, necessitates collective and communal efforts informed by spiritual and cultural modes of knowledge, including alternative healing practices and ancestral mediation.

Keywords: health; healing; ancestral mediation; illness; activism; women's rights

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Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) opens with a seemingly simple question posed by Minnie Ransom, a healer: "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" Minnie returns to this question in various iterations throughout the novel in order to assist the troubled protagonist in finding her own definition of wellness within her turbulent life. *The Salt Eaters* centralizes the problem of illness and the actualization of wellness within a setting that necessitates the presence of medical caregivers, healers, the ill person, and members of their community. In doing so, Bambara creates a symbiotic model that thrives on the dynamic interface between these groups. The question of one's agency in her own illness and wellness is one that black women writers portray as central not only to the health of the individual but also to the health of their communities;[1] this is particularly the case in *The Salt Eaters*. For Velma, the experience of living with mental illness as a black woman and coming undone psychologically becomes interwoven with certain black cultural and historical traditions and legacies—embodied in Minnie's character as well as numerous community members that witness Velma's healing. These legacies are rooted in slavery and cultivated by generations of black Americans for the purpose of survival. Minnie's question, then, extends beyond Velma's current state to a *desire* to be well in an uncertain future that is every day impacted by patriarchal and racist institutions; wellness requires continuous and purposeful action. In this way, *The Salt Eaters* exemplifies Bambara's rich legacy of political activism and rootedness in a collective of black women writers whose work shaped the contours of 20th century African American literature. This chapter considers *The Salt Eaters* in the context of Bell Hooks' *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* alongside Arthur Kleinman's definition of illness as "transactional, communicative and profoundly social" in order to explore "long-suffering" (Kleinman 1989, p. 186) as a problem that plagues black women and communal healing as a solution that manifests as a metaphorical womb in the space of the novel. I employ a black feminist reparative reading practice to engage specific instances in the text

[1] See also Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*.

when other characters encounter and interact with Velma in the midst of her healing ceremony and suggest that these interactions exemplify the power (and necessity) of the communal healing space for participants and witnesses as it connects the ill or affected person to members of their community through a shared narrative of struggle related to suffering, illness, and rich cultural and historical legacies. Further, this shared space that functions like a womb empowers and centers the individual and their community as active participants in the larger project of healing and community building.

The Salt Eaters depicts the narrative of Velma Henry, wife, mother, and civil rights activist, as she sits opposite a healer in the treatment room of a local hospital after attempting to kill herself. The novel accesses Velma's memories and the memories of her family, friends, and those impacted by her illness in order to construct a sweeping portrait of Velma's steady descent into mental illness. Through several key points of view, Bambara reveals that Velma has suffered from and struggled with a series of mental breakdowns that force her to neglect caring for herself, her husband, and her son. These perspectives also reveal that those close to Velma knew or had unsettling feelings about her psychological wellbeing but ignored or were unable to come to terms with the severity of her condition until it was too late. Bambara establishes that Velma's mental breakdown is not merely the result of her inability to make sense of the world around her but part of her inheritance as a spiritual guide and healer like her godmother Sophie Heywood. Thus, the novel endeavors to reconcile what Velma cannot know in her ignorance of the spiritual world and what she must come to learn in order to survive. *The Salt Eaters* concludes with Velma still in the infirmary after Minnie safely delivers her from the abyss of her own troubled mind. Velma has identified the source of her current crisis and found a reason to step back into her life—one that anchors her to a legacy of spiritual guides and healers and helps make sense of the noise of the world around her. I reveal the imperative of individual healing in communal spaces in *The Salt Eaters* through careful consideration of the role "long-suffering" plays in affirming and sustaining a culture of unacknowledged pain in black women. This is further evidenced by Nadeen's transformation as she witnesses Velma's healing within the womb-like space created by Minnie and members of Velma's community; Nadeen's character is read as a representative of the next generation.

1. The Role of the Communal Healing Space

Bambara does well to represent existing tensions between medical practitioners and healers even as she structures the text around Velma's healing ceremony. Velma's treatment at Southwest begins with Dr. Julius Meadows caring for the self-inflicted wounds on her wrists after her failed suicide attempt. Once this physical care is administered, Minnie is called in to perform her healing ritual that centers on touch (laying on of hands), song (finding a harmonious chord that allows the patient to harmonize/vibrate in communion with others and themselves), and communal unification (via the presence and participation of the witnesses at Southwest). Given the physician–healer collaborative practice that takes place within Southwest's walls, Velma's case is not an anomaly. In fact, throughout the ceremony Minnie tells Velma about another woman she healed earlier that day. Minnie also speaks to her spirit guide Old Wife about some of the women she has worked with and Dr. Meadows recounts Minnie's patients who would be considered psychiatric cases at other hospitals. However, what is different about Velma's case is her initial resistance to Minnie's form of healing. Minnie's hands are rendered "silent and her fingertips still" as a result of Velma shutting herself off from the world (47). This causes Minnie to deviate from her standard of practice (one that is already considered unconventional), which in turn causes the medical practitioners and community to feel out of step and disjointed. Minnie's approach to healing requires a physical connection that works to recalibrate the body and transition the person from illness to "wholeness". The connection that Minnie establishes hinges on her position as a conduit through which a "healing force" can help the patient uncover and tend to illness and suffering. Typically, Minnie:

> ... simply placed her left hand on the patient's spine and her right on the navel, then clearing the channels, putting herself aside, she became available to a healing force no one had yet, to her satisfaction, captured in a name. Her eyelids closed locking out the bounce and bang

> of light and sound and heat, sealing in the throbbing glow that spread from the corona of light at the crown of the head that moved forward between her brows then fanned out into a petaled rainbow, fanning, pulsing, then contracting again into a single white flame [. . .] Eyes closed and the mind dropping down to the heart, bubbling in the blood then beating, fanning out, flooded and shinning, she knew each way of being in the world and could welcome them home again, open to wholeness. Eyes wide open to the swing from expand to contract, dissolve congeal, release restrict, foot tapping, throat throbbing in song to ebb and flow of renewal, she would welcome them healed into her arms. (Bambara 1980, pp. 47–48)

Bambara's description of Minnie's practice suggests a science of the mind and body that allows Minnie to see and step into her patients—a practice that Toni Morrison's healer Consolata uses to keep other characters alive in *Paradise*. Whereas Consolata utilizes this practice on characters who are near physical death, Minnie employs the practice in order to give her patients health and wholeness. By entering into the body of the patient as a force of light or energy, Minnie effectively discovers and exposes the abnormalities and disturbances to the patient. Minnie listens to the body and uses tapping, humming, and music to bring the patient back into alignment with her body: "she would lean her ear to the chest or place her hand to the base of the spine till her foot tapped and their head bobbed, till it was melodious once more" (p. 48). Minnie's healing ritual seeks to bring balance back to the patient, in Velma's case a spiritual balance, through a therapeutic mediation that occurs within the patient.

The visiting interns, nurses, and technicians observe Minnie's interaction with Velma with amusement, disbelief, or embarrassment (Bambara 1980, p. 9). Some even think Minnie is "goofing off". The goofing off to which the interns refer is Minnie asking questions of and at times touching Velma. Minnie attempts to assess Velma's openness to the healing practice by repeatedly asking her if she's sure that she wants to be well (a question some of the hospital staff think is silly) because Minnie senses that Velma is closed off to anything beyond her own confused thoughts. Minnie's line of inquiry offers Velma an opportunity to decide whether or not she wants to be well and whether or not she is willing to take on the responsibilities of enacting wellness. Further, it allows Velma the chance to finally uncover the pain and strife she has repressed. Through this type of assessment, Minnie attempts to reach Velma and prepare her for the healing, if Velma is willing to relinquish her tight hold on her a precariously pieced together reality.

Bambara acknowledges the importance of non-sexual touching as a means of healing and communicating. Recalling Farah Griffin's discussion of textual healing and Joanne Gabbins' exploration of laying on hands, touch works therapeutically and allows the healer to establish a physical and psychic connection with the affected woman.[2] Touch also allows Minnie to approach Velma in a way that asks her for a connection that does not take from her (at least not in a negative way). This touch also resists diagnosis as a form of medical treatment and expands rather than limits Velma's role in sustaining her health. Ann Folwell Stanford states that novels that "resist the definitions that would serve as access points for institutionalized, technological medicine" suggest that "medicine's tools are simply inappropriate or that the cure may actually be worse than the illness" (Stanford 2003, p. 16). That Velma remains as spiritually and psychologically damaged when Minnie first encounters her as she was *before* the doctors treated her is an indicator of the failure of the physician model of care to address adequately these types of ruptures. Stanford also notes that "Minnie *loans* her breath to Velma; she does not attempt to breathe for her, nor to surround or entrap her" (Stanford 1993, p. 29). Minnie positions herself in a partnership with Velma in order to assist her in recovering herself even as Minnie exists as the spiritual guide who facilitates Velma's movement towards wholeness.

While the interns view Minnie's actions as undisciplined, her methods do impact Velma far more than the treatments provided by the physicians. Velma is described as being "caught, caught up, in the weave of the song Minnie was humming, of the shawl, of the threads, of the silvery tendrils

[2] See Farah Griffin's "Textual Healing" (Griffin 1996) and Joanne Gabbin's "A Laying on of Hands" (Gabbin 1990).

that extended from the healer's neck and hands and disappeared into the sheen of the sunlight" (Bambara 1980, p. 4). Minnie is at once open and expansive, occupying space outside of her own body, and focused as she attempts enter into Velma's body to take account of what damage has been done. Bambara associates Minnie with nature as she becomes one with sunlight, and nurture as she embodies the characteristics of a grandmother with silver hair and a shawl. Minnie's presence and her actions signify a coalescence of the maternal healer with western medical practice in a way that exposes and attends to culturally specific trauma. Velma's initial response to Minnie's presence is instructive here as she considers this a "stupid damn question", wonders at how Minnie can be "blind to Velma's exasperation, her pain, her humiliation?", and finally that Minnie seems "unconcerned that any minute she might strike the very note that could shatter Velma's bones" (p. 4). Velma's reaction indicates the precarious nature of unmasking and acknowledging her own vulnerability. For Velma, masking becomes an expression of hiding the unacknowledged pain and humiliation that Minnie's intervention threatens to uncover. Minnie's presence and song reach Velma in much the same way that Celie draws a song out of Shug as Celie bathes her and combs through her hair in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Touch acts as a medium through which one woman can communicate with another in order to move her towards self-reflective practices and ultimately, healing. For Shug, Celie combing her hair in the bathtub acts as a healing balm and Shug begins to hum. Shug calls the song "Miss Celie's Blues". The power of the rhythm and the musical chord permeate Velma so deeply that she feels she must "steel herself against intrusion" (p. 5). Minnie's humming and song are able to reach Velma in ways that clinical interventions could not. While Minnie's questions provide an opening into Velma's psyche, it is the nuanced construction and delivery of Minnie's song that seems to linger even after Minnie stops singing and humming.

Even Minnie's brief laying on of hands helps to reach further into Velma in an attempt to assess whether or not she is open to healing and *desires* wellness. Bambara describes the touch as:

> Minnie ... leaning forward, the balls of three fingers pressed suddenly, warm and fragrant, against Velma's forehead, the left hand catching her in the back of her head, cupping gently the two stony portions of the temporal bone. And Velma was inhaling in gasps, and exhaling shudderingly. She felt aglow, her eyebrows drawing in toward the touch as if to ward off the invading fingers that were threatening to penetrate her skull. And the hands went away quickly, and Velma felt she was losing her eyes. (Bambara 1980, p. 6)

Here, Minnie's touch creates a tension within Velma's body as she actively resists giving in to the healing practice. Velma rejects Minnie's assessment and intervention as a result of her desire to "be sealed, and inviolate" (p. 5). The danger that Velma articulates early on about her bones shattering manifests again as gasps and the fear of temporarily losing her eyes. In this moment when she is devoid of seeing, Velma is made aware of the force and energy that is associated with Minnie's practice; a force that causes her to turn her gaze inward. This inward gaze causes Velma to search for the moment when her psyche splinters. But this process of uncovering the origin of her suffering opens Velma up to the raw experience of pain and humiliation that she believes Minnie ignores throughout the ceremony. However, Minnie's song and her initial physical contact with Velma establish the rules of the healing practice and guarantee Velma the safe space to encounter and work through her illness. Minnie commits herself to Velma and the healing practice as she expands to fill the space of the room and allow for a secure encounter with whatever is blocking Velma's flow (p. 48).

Bambara imagines that this space of healing also includes a tangible community of witnesses who act as communicative bodies in relation to the ill person, Velma. The community of witnesses creates a protective womb around Velma and Minnie, nurturing Minnie's healing forces and keeping at bay any negative energy. The space is pregnant with the possibility of healing. The individual members of this community have experienced illness and disease and function here, in part, as wounded storytellers. They come together en masse on the days that Minnie practices in order to assist someone else with their illness. Velma sits atop a stool surrounded by "The twelve, or The Master's Mind", a group who offer their prayerful and meditative support to both Minnie and her patients (Bambara 1980, p. 11).

Immediately behind this circle of twelve are lay members of the community, patients, and hospital staff. In this manifestation of womb space, Velma becomes the fetus (developing), Minnie the umbilical cord (providing the lifeline), the Twelve the amniotic sac (protecting her), and those surrounding them the uterine wall (holding her). All of the people who form the womb around Velma act as witnesses to her illness as well as her anticipated healing. They sustain her as she turns inward to begin the process of healing. In several instances, the witnesses add their voices to Minnie's to affirm what she's telling Velma. One witness states, "I been there ... I know exactly what the good woman means" and another responds, "we all been there, one way or t'other" (p. 16). They receive Velma's illness and resistance without trepidation, affirm the reality of Velma's burden, and testify to the power and truth of Minnie's ministrations. The physical layout of the ritual prioritizes the role of the wounded storytellers and their collective of voices that rise to intermingle with Minnie's underscore the interactive and dynamic relationship that exists within Southwest. Bambara privileges their experiential knowledge so that even in the personal space of illness, one's environment and community contribute to either furthering that illness or facilitating wellness. Stanford suggests, " ... these illnesses are out of medicine's reach and remain in domain of people and communities best equipped to understand them, those who have the wisdom and skill to facilitate a healing that is not and cannot be separate from social context" (Stanford, *Bodies*, p. 17). Velma's illness calls forth the wounded storytellers from her community and asks them to tend to the suffering she endures as a black woman on the front lines of feminist and social justice movements. Their voices serve to validate the weight of this particular illness as its impact resonates throughout the community in one way or the other (Bambara 1980, p. 16).

Minnie's centrality in the text reaffirms the potential that practical applications of cultural legacies have on black women who are suffering from physical and mental illness and their communities. In her role of healer, she impacts the corporeal body and the spiritual self, fosters a tangible community of witnesses who act as communicative bodies in relation to Velma, and creates a womb-like space that encapsulates, sustains, and helps deliver her from the depths of her illness. Velma's wellness becomes the responsibility of the spiritual healers, of her community, of the medical community, *and* of Velma herself.

2. The Role of Long-Suffering and Questions of Wellness

Wellness, as imagined within the space of the novel, reflects Velma's inability and sometimes refusal to recognize illness in herself, as well as her family's inability or unwillingness to see/name it. This denial operates as a self-imposed tool of survival for everyone involved; each character benefits from their close proximity to socially constructed definitions of wellness. Bambara's opening sentence of *The Salt Eaters* foregrounds the significance of wellness as a literary trope and the ways in which a character's adherence to or rejection of accepted conceptualizations of wellness determines their ability to create and sustain self-reflective healing practices. Wellness, when positioned as a decision that requires critical self-examination, redirects movement from a constructed idea grossly applied to everyone, to the actuality of each character's body in their given situation. The unique history of injury and trauma carried by each character must be excavated and explored in order for them to create their own definition of wellness and understand themselves in relation to that definition. One cannot say they want to be well if there is not a clear understanding of what it means for them to be well. Bambara's placement of wellness within an era of civil rights underscores its political and social import, especially for black women. The emphasis lies on the liberatory practice of creating self-definitions of wellness that are rooted in acknowledging and affirming one's own history. Bambara writes:

> So used to being unwhole and unwell, one forgot what it was to walk upright and see clearly, breathe easily, think better than was taught, be better than one was programmed to believe ... For people sometimes believed that it was safer to live with complaints, was necessary to cooperate with grief, was all right to become an accomplice in self-ambush ... They wore their crippleness or blindness like a badge of honor, as though it meant they'd been singled

> out for some special punishment, were special . . . But way down under knowing 'special' was a lie, knowing better all along and feeling the cost of the lie, of the self-betrayal in the joints, in the lungs, in the eyes. Knew, felt the cost, but were too proud and too scared to get downright familiar with their bodies, minds, spirits to just sing . . . Took heart to flat out decide to be well and stride into the future sane and whole. (Bambara 1980, pp. 107–8)

Bambara's description calls to mind the biblical fruit of the spirit "long-suffering", defined as "having or showing patience in spite of troubles, especially those caused by other people."[3] People who actively practice long-suffering work are "patient, forbearing, tolerant, uncomplaining [. . .] stoical, resigned."[4] Bambara's particular portrait of long-suffering captures the difficulty of acknowledging and addressing illness and disease and implies that the person who is suffering is coerced into accepting their condition in order to avoid contradicting larger narratives about who and what they are. These narratives include the black male-centric leadership models forwarded during the civil rights movement that Bambara engages through Velma's political affiliations. This model exemplifies how black women were expected to embody the spirit of long-suffering so that the race could attain civil rights and equality. Black women were told to set aside their individual and collective concerns about including the health and wellness of black women within the national discourse about legal protections and civil rights for black people. They were also expected to remain silent about the ways in which their labor was being used by civil rights and black power movements with no consideration of the impact it had on their physical and spiritual health. To return to the above passage, stoicism and forbearance cause them to suffer through the many illnesses and diseases that plague their bodies. Bambara calls this "self-ambush" and "self-betrayal". Through the coercive and manipulative rhetoric of sacrificing personal desire for the uplift of the race, women like Velma became accomplices in denying their own illnesses; a practice that became so ingrained for Velma that she creates and revisits a list of grievances as a way to cope with the slights she suffers. This characterization of being unwell and unwhole in order to somehow ease one's lot in life and uphold tropes of strength in the face of overwhelming circumstances hinders the creation of self-definitions of wellness.

The issue of long-suffering overwhelms Velma as she struggles to carry the weight of her responsibilities as a wife, mother, feminist, and civil rights activist. Unlike the other women around her who are able to manage these responsibilities without ignoring their health, Velma neglects herself and ultimately succumbs to the burden of the load; she tries to kill herself. Wellness, for Velma, masquerades as productivity; as long as Velma actively engages in social justice projects and works toward the uplift of her race and community, she is well. Bambara demonstrates that this particular idea of wellness is in fact a denial of illness, and it effectively contributes to the worsening of the initial illness. Prior to her suicide attempt, Velma's character is the embodiment of the trope of the strong black woman. Many scholars have addressed this trope directly and considered its debilitating impact on the lives of black women.[5] The trope and the biblical idea of long-suffering reward the excessive work and self-deprecation of black women through the creation of a narrative that champions these behaviors. While many members of her community recognize that Velma is unwell, her productivity and willingness to sacrifice herself for the advancement of civil rights allows them to look beyond her declining health. Like the elders that champion their scars and refuse to acknowledge what was lost in the formation of those scars, Velma holds her trials as another part of what she must endure.

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[3] See OED definition of long-suffering.
[4] See OED definition of long-suffering.
[5] See Michelle Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (Wallace 1978) an important critical work that is contemporaneous with the publication of Bambara's *The Salt Eaters.*

2.1. Are You Sure, Sweetheart, That You Want to Be Well?

Bambara addresses the question of whether or not Velma desires wellness within the context of her specific life experiences and, in doing so, raises concerns about what appears to be the elusiveness of physical and mental wellness for a larger group of women who are forced to negate their own self-health for their families, communities, jobs, and race. This general inability to grasp or maintain mental and physical health becomes inextricably linked to another concern impacting black women—that of denying cultural and spiritual inheritances while negotiating and finding voice and agency within male-dominated institutions. Bell Hooks speaks about the importance of truth telling to spiritual and mental health and states: "Dissimulation makes us dysfunctional. Since it encourages us to deny what we genuinely feel and experience, we lose our capacity to know who we really are and what we need and desire" (Hooks 2005, p. 15). Velma's downward spiral originates from her denial of the spiritual gifts that she shares with Minnie and her female ancestors, the mud mothers (women who are one with the earth and embody natural healing practices), as well as her unacknowledged self-sacrifice for the sake of her community work. The symptoms manifest as sensitivity to light and sound, paranoia, and a diminished ability to take care of herself. The outcome is that Velma attempts to kill herself by slitting her wrists and climbing into her oven. Before Velma can even answer the question of whether or not she wants to be well, she must first break through the wall she erects to keep out everyone who wants something from her. Velma "Withdraw[s] the self to a safe place where husband, lover, teacher, workers, no one could follow, probe" (Bambara 1980, p. 5). Velma's retreat fosters a false sense of security that enables her to shield her vulnerability and pain from her family and friends who have tired of her aloofness and fits. Similar to the description of the long-suffering individuals above, Velma finds safety in the denial of her illness. Even after she experiences periodic breaks in her mental health during which she must rely on her husband Obie and sister Palma, Velma pulls away from both of them and retreats to an inner sanctum. Minnie's initial touch and urging for Velma to free herself from the pain of the past, in which Velma describes the sensation of losing her eyes, causes her to return to that pivotal moment in the kitchen and her feelings of finally coming undone. Hooks also notes, "Our mental well-being is dependent on our capacity to face reality. We can only face reality by breaking through denial" (Hooks 2005, p. 16). Velma must confront her desire to be sealed away from the world, the desire to withdraw forever from the unending and overpowering demands of life. Part of her truth lies in this moment. She describes her return as "a telepathic visit with her former self, who seemed to be still there in the kitchen reenacting the scene like time counted for nothing" (Bambara 1980, p. 18). She watches as *that* Velma moves back and forth, opens, cuts, leans, and searches in an effort to flee from and remain "unavailable to sounds, voices, cries" (p. 19). By acting as a witness to her own unraveling, Velma can begin to see herself in relation to all of the things in jars and on the shelf that are alive but "still", "inert", and "arrested", drawing a clear contrast between being alive and the act of living (p. 19).

Velma's inability to recognize her inheritance as a spiritual guide impacts her ability to move from being alive to living with a purpose and contributes to her descent into paranoia and madness. Speaking of right livelihood, Hooks argues that contemporary black women find themselves working for money and status rather than following the example of their elders and working for and with a purpose. Hooks goes on to say that consciously working with purpose in a position that is meant for that person "enhances black female well-being" (Hooks 2005, p. 32). Velma's work as a civil rights activist elevates her community; but, as she commits herself to this important work, she denies her own calling as a spiritual guide. From an early age, Velma flees from images of the mud mothers who appeared in caves. These images were so frightening to Velma that she sought to block them out and deny their existence. However, the mud mothers are connected to a larger narrative and plan for her life that we might call her right livelihood. Velma's flight from her true calling contributes to her turmoil as the mud mothers haunt her at all hours. She recalls "In the attic they came in the mirror once. Ten or more women with mud hair, storing yams in gourds and pebbles in cracked calabash. And tucking babies in hairy hides. They came like a Polaroid. Stepping out of the mouth

of the cave, they tried to climb out of the speckled glass, talk to her, tell her what must be done all over again, all over again, all over again" (Bambara 1980, p. 255). Here, the mud mothers attempt to impart critical wisdom and knowledge to Velma, but she refuses to hear them. Velma does not allow herself to connect with what she believes are unrefined, uncivilized women. Yet the women, with yams and calabashes, embody a sweeping legacy of black womanhood. Hooks notes that "everywhere black women live in the world, we eat yam. It is a symbol of our Diasporic connections. Yams provide nourishment for the body as food yet they are also used medicinally—to heal the body" (Hooks 2005, p. 6). When we consider this particular symbol of the yam, it seems plausible that the mud mothers present to Velma with the intention of sustaining and healing one of their lost and suffering daughters. Velma's increasing estrangement from her cultural roots as she moves into the professional space of the nuclear plant and martyrs herself for civil rights movements is magnified by her inability to recognize and hear the call of the mud mothers.

Beyond the uncertainty of her inheritance, Velma cannot manage the unacknowledged "exasperation", "pain", and "humiliation" she endures from patriarchal hierarchies within the organization she co-founded and the civil rights movement that further contributes to her inner tumult. Obie talks about this as "ancient shit" that she won't let go and says:

> Let me help you, Velma ... learn to let go of past pain [...] Do you have any idea, Velma, how you look when you launch into one of your anecdotes? It's got to be costing you something to hang on to old pains. Just look at you. Your eyes slit, the cords jump out of your neck, your voice trembles, I expect fire to come blasting out of your nostrils any minute. It takes something out of you, Velma, to keep all them dead moments alive. Why can't you just ... forget ... forgive ... and always it's some situation that was over and done with ten, fifteen years ago. But here you are still all fired up about it, still plotting, up to your jaws in ancient shit. (Bambara 1980, pp. 21–22)

Obie is aware of the ways in which Velma's holding on to pain is contributing to her own mental and physical deterioration. Here, the relationship between dead and living things resurfaces as Velma breathes life into circumstances where she was slighted or humiliated. Unlike the sealed jars on the kitchen shelf that contain static items, Velma animates and relives the past in order to achieve some modicum of justice that was not afforded her at the time. Though Velma does not tell Minnie and the others what she witnesses herself doing in her kitchen, her thoughts reveal a woman who desperately needs to find release from too many obligations and not enough personal or spiritual development. Stanford notes that "Velma is consumed with long-standing anger, fear, and increasing alienation from her cultural and historical past, even as she works to maintain and move herself and her already progressive community beyond a narrow understanding of social justice" (Stanford 2003, p. 18). Velma's sense of frustration and desperation with her inability to effectively manage her life and reconcile the ways in which her own narrative is being overwritten by larger and more pressing ones—that of her husband, her son, the community center she co-founded, civil rights agendas and marches—is exemplified in these moments with Obie. Velma recounts two events related to this work that prevented her from caring for herself. Both involve not being prepared for her period—not being in tune with her body. The first instance occurs when Velma and other women who helped found the community collective attempt to strategically outmaneuver the men during a political campaign. Velma uses rally flyers to manage her flow because "There'd been nothing in the machines—no tampons, no napkins, no paper towels, no roll of tissue she could unravel and stuff her panties with" (p. 26). Velma silently endures the humiliation of leaking on herself in an effort to meet the expectations of the other women as they stand up for their rights within their organization. The second instance occurs when Velma's menstruation starts during a civil rights march. Again, Velma scrounges to find a means to manage the normal processes of her body. She is described as "Mounting a raggedy tampon fished from the bottom of her bag, paper unraveled, stuffing coming loose, and in a nasty bathroom with no stall doors, and in a Gulf station too, to add to the outrage. She'd been reeking of wasted blood

and rage" (p. 34). Velma's commitment to these different political causes obscures the physical needs of her body so that her cycle becomes not only an afterthought but also a burden. She deprioritizes herself at the same time that she is deprioritized by the men in her coalition group, her job, and the larger civil rights movement.

The mud mothers reaching out to Velma in an effort to reconnect her to a rich tapestry of black women signals a re-prioritization of her body, self, and purpose—concerns that are not considered in other aspects of her life. Like Minnie, the mud mothers extend to her a lifeline so that she might embark upon her path towards self-recovery. Black women, according to Stanford, are excluded from and victimized by social, political, and medical structures that seek to gain power and status by constructing and controlling narratives and knowledge. Bambara shows how women like Velma who demonstrate strength, leadership, and a strong work ethic can devote too much of themselves to work that does not edify their bodies or serve their interests as they strive to meet and exceed the standards of these narratives.[6] Hooks notes that black women "can easily become over-extended" in their occupations that ultimately lead to "burn-out" (Bambara 1980, p. 35). Throughout the novel, Velma is described as holding on and slipping away as the demands of life press down on her. Velma holds on to the stool in the medical facility because she feels faint. Velma also holds onto the hotel counter after a particularly exhausting protest march. However, despite her best efforts, Velma cannot hold onto herself. Her inability to manage her monthly menstrual cycle serves as yet another indicator of the ways in which she loses a grip on who she is and what she is really called to do with her life.

2.2. I Can Feel, Sweetheart, that You're Not Quite Ready to Dump the Shit . . .

Velma's illness has a profound impact on Obie, Palma, and especially Nadeen, who witnesses her healing. Inés Salazar states: "the act of healing that opens and closes the book serves as a metaphoric center for the process of bringing together community and subjects. The effort to make Velma well parallels the process of healing that Bambara envisions for the community as a whole" (Salazar 2000, p. 402). Obie, Palma, and Nadeen all encounter Velma during various stages of her journey and their experiences provide additional insight into her struggles and movement towards wholeness. Vis a vis Velma's interaction with these other characters, Bambara reaffirms the critical role that family and community play in witnessing illness and facilitating wellness. Velma's experience of illness as transactional and social resonates in her relationships with Obie and Palma as they witness and then account for her harrowing descent into the depths of paranoia, self-denial, and narrative incoherence. Both Obie and Palma possess information that is critical to glimpsing Velma's torment even as Velma attempts to analyze and make sense of her own actions. Obie describes Velma as "restless, lips swollen, circles under her eyes, spellbound", while Palma notes that she was "rigid, fearful" and "looked insane" (Bambara 1980, pp. 94, 139). Read alongside Velma's internal dialogue, the narratives of her husband and sister enhance and help to complete Bambara's portrait of mental illness and its particulars related to historical and cultural erasure and denial. The story of Velma's illness emerges as a crisis at the site of her body. While this crisis is not the failing of the physical body or even an outward and explicit assault on Velma's body, the internal turmoil and splitting of her self manifests as a heightened awareness of her spiritual isolation that leads to a desire to deny, destroy, and obliterate the self.

Obie's intimate relationship with Velma demonstrates how illness profoundly impacts the lives of those who are ill and those who are charged to care for and live with those struggling with illness. This connection is evident as the reader learns, "He [Obie] didn't recognize himself. He didn't recognize her either" (Bambara 1980, p. 94). Velma's illness changes the ways in which Obie imagines his own subjectivity as it relates to patriarchal definitions of manhood (husband, father, provider). Her ransformation that involves a narrative de-evolution and movement away from intelligible, cohesive articulations of self forces Obie into a space that destabilizes traditional forms of knowledge

[6] See also Courtney Thorsson's *Women's Work: Nationalism and Contemporary African American Women's Novels* (Thorsson 2013).

and expertise—forms that allow him to know himself. Velma's illness process shuts him out at the same time that it requires him to participate in and witness these processes. Obie is at once excluded from understanding the sharp dimensions of Velma's torment related to the mud mothers and included in Velma's care. Obie offers two instances that are especially instructive when thinking through how Velma's illness is social and transactional. First, Obie witnesses Velma "Walking jags, talking jags, grabbing his arm suddenly and swirling her eyes around the room, or collapsing in the big chair, her head bent over. He'd grown afraid *for her*." (Emphasis mine, p. 162). Velma presents to Obie as restless and at times deranged. Her behavior causes him to worry about her well-being. The passage continues, "She talked on the surface, holding him off, shutting herself off from herself too, it seemed. And at night, holding her, he felt as though he were holding on to the earth in a quake, the ground opening up, the trees toppling, the mountains crumbling, burying him. Then he'd grown afraid *of her*" (Emphasis mine, p. 162). Here Velma retreats inwardly with such force that Obie feels movement when he holds her. This frightening pulling away signals, for him, a massive destruction of their world. Velma's illness ultimately prevents Obie from connecting with her in a way that helps him visualize a path towards wellness. This is partly due to his fear of and for Velma as well as his inability to connect with the very nature of her illness (as detailed above with the mud mothers). This inability to connect is painfully evident when Obie misrecognizes and misreads Velma's fear and attempts to be physically intimate with her rather than provide a compassionate embrace. After characterizing Velma as being "like a brick, a stone, a boulder that would not be moved," Obie laments that he no longer knows how to reach Velma (p. 163). According to Obie, Velma needs constant visual confirmation that nothing and no one is hiding under the clothes on their bedroom chair or in their bedroom closet. Obie's account of Velma's turn inward that shuts him out and her own description of the same reaffirm his disconnection from her needs and desires. However, this does not preclude Obie from having sex with Velma, even in these moments when she is overcome with fear of the mud mothers whose presence she feels. Obie "coming back toward the bed looking at her twisting in the covers or climbing on the pillows, he would stare at her opening glistening and wet, inviting, misleading. He would gather her up again, but inside she was dry and her muscled clenched before he could enter deep, clench and shut him out. 'Let go, Velma,' groaning into her neck. 'Don't let go, Obie,' trembling in his arms" (p. 163). Velma's cry to Obie asks that he hold on to her. Velma has already demonstrated an inability to hold on to herself. Throughout the story she threatens to slip away, yet in this moment with Obie she pleads for him to help her hold on. However, Obie cannot tend to Velma's spiritual lack and her body rejects what he can offer her physically.

Ultimately, Obie wonders whether or not Velma's mental slippages are connected to physical loss—the loss of their baby. The reader learns that "Ever since he'd demanded more of a home life, she'd been in a stew, threatening to boil over and crack the pot all right. Or maybe the cracking had begun years earlier when the womb had bled, when the walls had dropped away and the baby was flushed out" (Bambara 1980, p. 94). Obie comes to this detail about their baby more than once in the novel, each time acknowledging the miscarriage as a major site of loss and here suggesting that it contributes to cracking the pot known as Velma. Hooks states that "being 'used to pain' does not mean that we will know how to process it so that we are not overwhelmed or destroyed by grief" (Hooks 2005, p. 78). Certainly, the type of long-suffering that Bambara details early in the novel includes the physical and psychological pain of enduring a miscarriage. Bambara challenges the idea of cooperating with grief for the sake of keeping one's life intact and argues instead that grief must be dealt with directly in order to be well or whole. Hooks also notes the importance of women speaking with one another about grief as "bottled-in grief can erupt into illness" (Hooks 2005, p. 79). Obie gives voice to the trauma this type of physical and personal loss creates as well as the danger of ignoring it only after Velma's illness takes hold of her. In all of the ways that Obie attempts to help Velma recover herself, he unwittingly advances a patriarchal construction of illness and healing that attempts to diagnose and cure her illness. This construction contributes to her inward spiral and in the end can only offer a remote rendering of Velma's illness.

Palma also notices and becomes unsettled by her sister's steady descent into madness, but, unlike Obie, Palma ultimately understands that Velma's illness extends beyond western notions of illness and wellness. Palma's connection to a collective of women that represent black women throughout the diaspora engenders the community that Hooks argues is necessary for recovery of self and community. After Palma comes across a picture of Velma that was taken immediately before she started her mental decline, Palma becomes convinced that something has happened to Velma. In the picture Velma has "her arms turned out so that the unsunned and exposed insides showed childlike and vulnerable, as if waiting for the shock of the alcoholed cotton and the sting of the needle" (Bambara 1980, p. 139). Velma's posture here, open and demonstrative, informs the larger narrative that Palma witnesses in her interactions with her sister and signals her current state at Southwest Infirmary. Though Palma is unaware of Velma's attempted suicide, the picture creates anxiety at the site of Velma's body and forces her to go find her sister. Over the course of her illness, Palma finds Velma physically stiff and tense, unable to create cohesive or coherent conversation, and detached from the reality of what was happening around her. At her worst, Palma notes that Velma bit through a glass. Palma's vivid accounts of Velma during this precarious time parallel Velma's early description of the mud mothers; images of wild, uncontained women with unruly hair, clothes, and speech. Like Obie, Palma admits to feeling scared for Velma, but her fear does not prevent her from caring for Velma's needs, which includes therapeutic, non-sexual touch.

2.3. Choose Your Cure, Sweetheart. Decide What You Want to Do with Wholeness

For those who witness Velma's healing at Southwest, the social implications of illness are more profound because of their immediate access to a visual representation of emergent wellness. This is especially the case for Nadeen, a pregnant teenager who watches the ceremony hoping to see "the real thing" after witnessing too many fake healings (Bambara 1980, p. 105). Velma's public healing occurs in a space that is accessible to the community. It fosters a sense of shared responsibility and commonality for Nadeen who is able to occupy part of the room behind the tight circle that surrounds Velma. Nadeen reflects: "This was what it was supposed to be. A clean, freshly painted, quiet music room with lots of sunlight. People standing about wishing Mrs. Henry well and knowing Miss Ransom would do what she said she would do" (p. 113). Another character, Fred, reports a similar sentiment, saying: "Meanwhile, it felt okay to just be there. The longer he looked at the two women, especially the classy old broad, the better he felt. [...] There was no one who looked like agitators or troublemakers to him" (p. 271). Both Nadeen and Fred express the feeling of being amongst people who are invested in the project of wellness. They describe the room and the environment as nurturing, healthy, and optimistic. They are on the outermost layer of the circle that surrounds Velma. Nadeen's experience differs from those in the circle who actively participate in the healing. She searches for an aspect of spiritual truth in the interaction between Minnie and Velma as well as assurances that illness (in any form) can be healed; that wholeness is possible. Velma's illness and healing serve as an entry point for Nadeen into a larger conversation that engages wellness as an action. The ceremony that Nadeen identifies as the real thing also introduces her to a starkly different depiction of black womanhood, one in which strength emerges from vulnerability and a willingness to be open. Nadeen can see Velma in her current state of undress and unresponsiveness and understand the price of unacknowledged suffering. Nadeen's pregnancy does more than signal new possibilities for intergenerational and spiritual connectedness to a younger generation of black women. Standing on the margins of the healing ceremony behind the wounded storytellers, Velma emerges as a reminder of what has always been at stake for black women and their communities: maintaining one's overall health while uplifting the race in a nation intent on crushing both.

Velma's willingness to enter into the healing ceremony with Minnie allows Nadeen to undergo her own healing of sorts that results in her proclamation of being "womanish" (Bambara 1980, p. 106). The potential of collective healing emerges in Nadeen as she renames herself and reaffirms her place in the world; Nadeen " ... felt special, felt smart like she'd never felt at home or at school" and part of

something important (p. 104). This collective space of healing rewards Nadeen's desire to know more about herself and life than she has been taught. As Nadeen witnesses Velma heal, she sees "something drop away from Mrs. Henry's face", after which Velma becomes more beautiful and unharried (p. 101). Velma is uncovered or, to borrow Hooks' terminology, "unmasked" in front of the group gathered to help usher her into wellness. Hooks claims that "collective unmasking is an important act of resistance" for black people because it allows them to walk in the truth of their identities and histories (Hooks 2005, pp. 16–17). When Velma's mask falls away and Nadeen sees her wrists heal, she understands that anything is possible. Here, Velma's unmasking releases her from the weight of denying her spiritual inheritance and permits Nadeen to envision and embrace a new, empowered idea of black womanhood that allows her to be womanish, vulnerable, and courageous.

3. Conclusion: "Now You Just Hold that Thought . . . "

Bambara's act of writing a novel that hinges on one particular black woman's descent into mental illness and struggle towards a functional state of wellness is, I argue, not only an assertion of black women's selfhood and vulnerability, but ultimately a demonstration of power in spaces where these three things are vehemently denied. Hooks claims that "Black female self-recovery, like all black self-recovery, is an expression of a liberatory political practice [. . .] choosing 'wellness' is an act of political resistance" (Hooks 2005, p. 7). Velma affirms this notion when she proclaims towards the end of the healing ceremony that "Health is my right" (Bambara p. 119). Velma, as an activist at the front lines of insanity and an inheritor of spiritual giftedness, embodies the danger of cultural estrangement and the power of individual and collective awareness. One initial conclusion that emerges from reading *The Salt Eaters* alongside Hooks' *Sisters of the Yam* and Kleinman's definition of illness is that understanding Velma's illness within the broader context of social movements and community is vital to contemporary discussions of health and wellness for black women who, like Velma, also give themselves to social justice movements that fail to recognize or prioritize their subject positions. This neglect continues to place black women in precarious situations, as their labor is increasingly rendered invisible and the sacrifices they make at times contradict their own best interests and personal health. However, black women already have what they need to sustain themselves and one another: a legacy of stories and touch that heal. Hooks recalls the following:

> This morning as I went for walking meditation, I felt as though the world around me—the birds, the flowers, the newly cut green grass—was all a soothing balm, the kind Big Mama would spread on various parts of our body for any little old ailment. We thought her homemade salves had magical healing powers when we were children. Now, I am convinced that the magic, that the power to heal, resided in her warm, loving brown hands—hands that knew how to touch us and make us whole, how to make the hurt go away. (Hooks 2005, p. 1)

Wholeness, the sense of being complete and intact even in the face of physical fragmentation, is accessible through connections to other black women who carry within them the strength and legacies of their Diasporic foremothers. Questions of wellness that emerge within the novel find their answers in histories that thrive outside westernized modes of knowledge. To be well and sane as a black woman requires both honest introspection and collective re-affirmation. In order to answer Minnie's question in the affirmative, Velma (and by extension black women) must re-affirm healthy relationships with one another that create and sustain pathways towards wholeness and reprioritize black women's health in the larger domain of social justice movements.

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Talking Back: Phillis Wheatley, Race, and Religion

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Abstract: This essay examines the means by which African American poet Phillis Wheatley uses her evangelical Christianity to engage issues of race in revolutionary America. In her poetry and other writings, she addresses and even instructs white men of privilege on the spiritual equality of people of African descent.

Keywords: Phillis Wheatley; race; religion; Thomas Jefferson

Several years ago, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., delivered the Jefferson Lecture for the National Council for the Humanities and subsequently published it as *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* (Gates 2003). In it, he narrated the oft-repeated story of her meeting with a group of Boston gentlemen, who, at the behest of her master John Wheatley and her publisher, satisfied themselves that she had indeed written the poems for her book; their attestation was included in the front matter of the 1773 *Poems of Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Gates spends much of his lecture on the relationship between the poet and Thomas Jefferson, especially noting that the future president's highly negative comments on her were paradoxically echoed by Black Arts Movements critics of the 1960s and 1970s, though for very different reasons. Gates also observes that the view that Wheatley was largely imitative and too little concerned with racial experience continued to be dominant into the 1980s.

If he had extended his survey of scholarship into the new century, he would have seen a revision in the assessments of her. Much of the recent commentary has focused on the inherent ambivalence about race and black identity evident in the work; in addition, a number of critics have attended to her use of classical materials, the very thing that led to much of the earlier criticism.[1] The point of this essay is to take seriously Wheatley's title, specifically the "various subjects, religious and moral." Whether scholars and artists denigrate or validate her, they tend to emphasize the neo-classical elements of her poetry; almost all, like Jefferson, see the religious aspect as secondary at best when discussing her writings (Jefferson 1984).[2] What I contend is that it is through her verses and other writings on spiritual matters that we can see her engagement, implicitly and explicitly, with issues of race. Like the creators of the spirituals and many of the slave narratives, she uses her faith as an alternative source of sustenance, identity, and authority in a society that refused to acknowledge her fundamental humanity.

In *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), Jefferson specifically questions the relationship of religion to poetry. He says, "Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion, indeed, has produced a Phyllis Whately; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions produced under her name are below the dignity of criticism. The heroes of the Dunciad are to her, as Hercules to the author of that poem" (267). For him, the religion of Wheatley lacks both rational and imaginative components and thus is consistent with his reading of her race as emotional and subhuman.

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1 See Part 1 in Shields and Lamore.

2 As an exception that ultimately affirms my point, see Babacar M'Baye (2011), "The Pan-African and Puritan Dimensions of Phillis Wheatley's Poems and Letters," in Shields and Lamore (2011), pp. 271–78.

The place to start considering Wheatley's counterargument, given this subject, is the frontispiece of her only book. Since Vincent Carretta makes clear that she had considerable involvement in the publication process, we can assume that she had control over this image (Carretta 2011).[3] It is generally assumed to be the work of Scipio Moorhead, the slave of Reverend John Moorhead and trained by Sarah Moorhead, the minister's wife. The figure is framed by an oval band, clearly labeling Wheatley and indicating her race and station in life. Carretta has suggested in his biography that the band is a symbolic as well as literal boundary, suggesting the limits on her life (101). (Despite the designation, she was in fact a slave.) But the band can as easily be read as the illusion of an actual frame or medallion. What is also worth noting is that the subject is given her full name, even though it would be common, given her status, to have used only her Christian name. As a sidenote, George Washington, in response to her poem and letter to him, addresses her simply as "Phillis"; it is perhaps to this kind of verbal treatment that she is reacting in her claim of a surname, even if it is that of her owner. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. Frontispiece, Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral.

Also noteworthy are the effects of lighting on her attire. While the clothes suggest the attire of a serving girl, light and shadow emphasize the folds and gloss of the dress and apron; this suggests richness in the fabric that is in clear contrast to the usual representations of servants. Attention is also drawn to her skin tone, which nearly matches the dress. The cap is rather fanciful, indicating that the

[3] *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), pp. 94–101. Carretta also notes that Wheatley was the first colonial woman of any race to have a frontispiece attached to her writing and that the use of such an image of a living author was uncommon in the eighteenth century.

wearer is not generally engaged in typical domestic work. Carretta comments that the throat choker is again a symbol of restriction and confinement; however, other domestic art of the period shows white women and black women wearing the same neck ornament (101).

Facially, she has slightly uplifted eyes, gazing into the middle distance, what we might call pouty lips, and fingers supporting the chin. It reflects a contemplative moment, perhaps awaiting inspiration from the muse. Consistent with this is the hand holding the quill above the page. She has already produced lines of text, so we are in fact at a moment of writerly pause in the midst of creative activity. It is also worth noting the book on the table. The binding was commonly known in the period as Revivalist Bible binding.[4] Thus, it can be assumed that this is a Methodist Bible, but it is closed, suggesting that the subject is very familiar with the contents. Since she sat for this portrait, she has adopted the posture she wants to communicate to her readers. It defines her as a poet, and in doing so, contradicts the label of servant that defines her.

The presence of this particular version of the Bible links Wheatley to two key figures in the revivalist tradition: George Whitefield and the Countess of Huntingdon. Whitefield preached three times on his last American tour at Old South Church, where she was baptized, and once at the Wheatleys' home congregation, New South. While there is no specific record of Phillis's attendance at any of these events, it would be surprising if she did not, given her mistress Susanna's admiration of him.[5] In the same year as the visit, Phillis wrote an elegy, "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield. 1770." In the poem, she addresses the "Great Countess," for whom Whitefield served as chaplain. The Countess was much sought after by and considerate of those of African descent, including Olaudah Equiano. In a number of cases, she served as a sponsor of their publications and agreed, in the case of Wheatley, to have the volume of poems dedicated to her.

These connections to Methodism encouraged in her a willingness to engage prominent people and even instruct them on religious matters. In one of the earliest poems in her collection, she presumes to lecture the students of Harvard. She emphasizes their privilege and their training in the methods of reasoning. At the same time, she asserts her difference from them:

> Twas not long since I left my native shore
> The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom:
> Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand
> Brought me in safety from those dark shores.
>
> ("To the University")

Whatever one may think of the attitude toward Africa expressed here, the fact is that the poet wants to be very clear about her subject position. Unlike the students, she has had to move vast physical, cultural, linguistic, and spiritual distances to come to the religion that they were born into. Yet it is they, not she, who must be instructed about keeping the faith. Their scientific and philosophical training is a great opportunity, but it is nothing if they lose their moral foundations. It is useful to keep in mind that she was about fourteen when she wrote these lines, with only about seven years of schooling in English. Yet like a stern father, she instructs them:

> Improve your privileges while they stay,
> Ye pupils, and each hour redeem, that bears
> Or good or bad report of you to heav'n.
> Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul,
> By you be shunn'd nor once remit your guard;
> Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg.

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4 See "The History Behind the 18th Century Revivalist Style. n.d ()," www.leonardsbooks.com.
5 *Biography*, 34.

Ye blooming plants of human race devine,
An *Ethiop* tells you 'tis your greatest foe.

Again at the end of the poem, she reminds them of her race, suggesting, among other things, that she will never have the chances in life that they will, but nonetheless claims equality in the only realm available to her, that of religious faith.

The piece that has provided the most negative attention is "On Being Brought from Africa to America," an eight-line poem dated 1768, which would make her approximately fifteen at the time of composition and with no more than seven years as an English speaker. The controversial part is found in the first four lines:

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

(13; italics in original)

While "mercy" is not a term ever used elsewhere to refer to the Middle Passage of the slave trade, it is important to take into account the probable enthusiasm of her young conversion. After all, she was removed from her birth home before she was seven, and thus not of an age to have knowledge of her native belief system. It was "Pagan" in the eighteenth-century sense of not being Christian; her word choice would have been considered simply accurate and not pejorative at the time of its appearance. The fourth line on redemption, while it reflects some of the theological debates about whether those without knowledge of Christianity were damned, is almost absurd given the poet's age at the time of her kidnapping from her home. She is only recently past the age of spiritual accountability at the time of the poem's creation, to say nothing of her experience in Africa. The line simply puts her in the general category of those ignorant of belief, whether based on age or geography; in other words, it is another statement of fact, not a judgment on her race.

The final four lines return to her impulse in the previous poem to give instruction on race and religion to her "betters":

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd and join th' angelic train.

(13; italics in original)

Here again we see an act of ventriloquism as she speaks the voice of her antagonists. The quoted line sets up a word play with "diabolic" and "die," which then is doubled, since "sable" was a term to designate the color of mourning. In addition, it was so common in European lore for the devil to represented as black that the Puritans brought the notion to America. Thus, she locates in one line a complex of race, religion, history, and culture that captures the worldview of racism in her time.

One of the longest poems in her book is "Goliath of Gath," her retelling of the Biblical story of David's confrontation with the Philistine giant. Given its length and drama, it is surprising that it has not received any critical commentary, again suggesting that scholars have emphasized the classical and explicitly racial aspects of her work to the exclusion of the religious verse. She opens the work by using the discourse of neo-classical poetry to engage her Old Testament subject. She appeals to the muses to aid her in telling a tale of war. In the initial stanzas, she largely follows the narrative of First Samuel, in which the armies of Israel confront their frequent antagonists, the Philistines. From this enemy camp emerges Goliath in full battle regalia; he offers single combat to settle the conflict. He does this each day, and each day the Hebrew army withdraws in terror, until the shepherd boy David comes

to bring supplies to his brothers. He offers to take up the challenge, to the amazement of the soldiers and the resentment of his older brother, who considers him a braggart. Wheatley makes two minor modifications to her Biblical source. The first is to change the consequences of losing. In the original, Goliath proposes that the defeated army will become the servants of the victors. But the poem states:

"For he who wins, in triumph may demand

Perpetual service from the vanquish'd land."

Thus, she turns the conflict into a struggle about slavery.

The second change reinforces the first. In both versions, the question is raised of the rewards for defeating Goliath. In First Samuel, they are purely economic: "and it shall be that the man who kills him the king will enrich with great riches, will give him his daughter, and give his father's house exemption from taxes in Israel" (I Samuel 17:25). In Wheatley's version, the first two are the same, but the third is distinct:

"Freedom in Israel for his house shall gain."

Moreover, this benefit is placed first in her list. With these subtle shifts, she has made this a struggle between slavery and freedom.

A more significant modification is the poet's introduction of a warning to Goliath against taking on the children of God. An angel comes to him and tells him specifically what is going to happen. To fight with Israel is to fight against omnipotent authority, even if it takes the form of an unprotected young man. But Goliath is, of course, defiant and must pay the consequences. In both versions, the actual confrontation is abbreviated, almost anticlimactic. Though David carries five stones, the first is slung so accurately that it fells the giant. The rest of the narrative is devoted to the routing of the Philistines, the beheading of Goliath by the hero, and, importantly, the identification of David's lineage. Here again the poet amends the original to note that he is from a small, but valiant, tribe.

In choosing this story, Wheatley aligns herself with the slave creators of spirituals, sermons, and trickster tales. These expressive forms linked the experiences of African Americans to those of the children of Israel and focused on the ways the young, weak, and small could triumph over their more powerful foes. These materials were ways to keep alive belief in justice and freedom in the face of oppression and humiliation. In addition, the methods used were consistently those of cleverness and intelligence rather than physical force. Like David, they rejected martial armor in favor of spiritual strength. David only needed the skill to find the weak spot in his enemy's defenses; when he did so, the battle was quickly over. This was the hope of the slaves as well, though they had to endure for a much longer time.

Finally, in reference to this poem, we can see a connection between the artist and her hero. Like him, she is young, small, and marginal. Like Eliab, who questioned the shepherd boy, many doubted Wheatley's right to come into the public arena and to speak. Like him, she felt that she had the right and the preparation to enter the field of battle, in her case, with the literary, social, and political giants. Like him, she used her faith as her form of armor. Her book became her smooth stone.

She used her power in other ways as well. In her writings are poems written to or about five of the seventeen men who conducted the "trial" that authenticated her text. All except one are part of the significant number (almost half) of her published poems that are on the theme of death. Most are in the form of elegies or addresses to members of the bereaved family. These tend to follow the pattern of an acknowledgement of the sorrow of the family, a statement of the virtues of the deceased, and conclude with an admonition to be happy that the soul of that person now rests in heaven, far from the troubles of this world. In the case of Thomas Hubbard, we have a poem addressed to his daughter, Thankfull Hubbard Leonard, when her husband died in 1771, and then one to the father when Thankfull dies the next year. The poem to Thankfull follows the general scheme, with part of the first stanza consisting of a comment to Death about his "incessant" destruction of human life, regardless of age, vocation, or affection. She then notes the devastation done to the mourner: "her last groan shall rend the azure sky." The second stanza then turns to a repudiation of sorrow:

But cease thy tears, bid ev'ry sigh depart,

And cast the load of anguish from thine heart.

The reason to stop grieving is that the mourner must imagine her reunion with the beloved in heaven; she should prepare herself to join him where there are "pleasures more refin'd."

The poem to Thomas Hubbard provides an instructive variation on the pattern. It is useful to know that Hubbard was treasurer of Harvard College for twenty years and a prominent merchant; at one point, according to Gates, he had also been a slave dealer. Thus, he is an important member of the dominant white society that had enslaved Wheatley and countless others. He was also a model of status and authority for those Harvard students in the earlier poem.

The poem begins in the writer's conventional way, by noting the sorrow that Hubbard must be experiencing, but before the end of the first stanza, she has moved into the imperative mood:

Let Recollection take a tender part,
Assuage the raging tortures of your heart,
Still the wild tempest of tumultuous grief,
And pour the heav'nly nectar of relief:
Suspend the sigh, dear Sir, and check the groan.

In other words, she instructs this distinguished gentleman in how to behave even in matters of private emotion. The reason for this is that Thankfull has been a person of great virtue whose place in heaven is assured. Thus, she has gladly moved into the afterlife and escaped the troubles of this world. Consistently in these poems, Wheatley represents heaven as a space of freedom, of peace, and of release from the sorrows of life. In this she is much like the creators of the spirituals, whose expressions we have now come to see, not as mere resignation, but as a form of resistance to enslavement.

The new element in this poem is an act of ventriloquism; the poet speaks in the voice of the deceased. While the words that are spoken are part of the convention of resignation and acceptance, what is significant is the presumption of the slave to speak in the voice of the mistress. Given the views of Jefferson and many others about the moral and intellectual capacity of blacks, Wheatley's claim that she knows the mind and feelings of a cultivated white woman and has the right to speak them publicly is a challenge to white authority and superiority.

Finally, to bring the argument full circle, I want to look at a letter and a poem that implicitly bring us back to Jefferson. The poem engages in theological polemics. Among the poems in her 1772 Proposals, but not in the published work, are two pieces, both dated 1767, entitled "An Address to the Atheist" and "An Address to the Deist." Each calls on the addressee to turn away from unbelief, and each refuses to acknowledge in any way the validity of the other's views. The attack on Deism focuses specifically on any questioning of the trinity and threatens eternal damnation for any doubts on this issue. She also uses the standard argument that the unbeliever will come to his senses at the last moment, but that it will be too late to avoid divine retribution.

To this point, the poem appears to offer little beyond evangelical rhetoric of the sort found in the sermons of George Whitefield, whom Wheatley elegized in another work. But there are a few points to distinguish these verses. First, it opens with the line, "Must Ethiopians be employ'd for you?" We are offered no context for this, unlike the address to the Harvard students. But clearly it has the same implications. Though the deist may be a person of privilege, his religious error places him in a position to be admonished and taught by a believer, even one in the lowest position in society. He is so far astray that one he considers an inferior can lead him back to the path of righteousness. His status does not preclude him from needing the aid of one who he has labeled pagan and savage. The line, in other words, immediately subverts the conventional social hierarchy by claiming a higher order of things. The word "employ'd" skillfully retains the appearance of conventional power but undermines it by suggesting that it is the "Ethiopian" who has been sent to save the deist.

Furthermore, Wheatley asks the deist to "Attend to Reason whispering in thine ear." Deism, as we know, was in fact one of the theological expressions of the Enlightenment, of Reason itself. But for

Wheatley, the apparently self-evident truths of Christianity were a form of rationality higher than that of her antagonist. Arguments against the trinity and against belief in general were irrational in the clear light of faith. And refusal to accept the tenets of that faith had predictable outcomes and thus required acceptance in the same way as mathematical problems.

Several years later, she has a brief correspondence with Samuel Occum (Occum 2006), the well-known Mohegan Indian who became an evangelical missionary to Natives Americans in the New York-New England area. Occum apparently knew the entire Wheatley family from his visits to Boston; there are letters to and from Susanna, Phillis's mistress.[6] While his letter to the slave seems lost, her response indicates that he had expressed clearly anti-slavery views. Her text was reproduced in the *Connecticut Gazette; and Universal Intelligencer* as a "specimen of her ingenuity" (*Complete Writings*, 152) (Wheatley 2001). In it we see her most direct statement of her attitude toward slavery and enslavers.

The bulk of the letter is one long, periodic sentence that weaves together her Enlightenment, religious, and racial views:

> I have this day received your obliging kind Epistle, and am greatly satisfied with your Reasons respecting the Negroes, and think highly reasonable what you offer in Vindication of their natural Rights; Those that invade them cannot be insensible that the divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness which broods over the Land of Africa; and the Chaos which has reign'd so long, is converting into beautiful Order, and reveals more and more clearly, the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty, which are so inseparably united, that there is little or no Enjoyment of one without the other: Otherwise, perhaps, the Israelites had been less solicitous for the Freedom from Egyptian Slavery; I do not say that they would have been contented without it, by no means, for in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our Modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us. God grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time. (pp. 152–53)

She employs Revolutionary rhetoric in claiming a universal natural right to freedom, and while her comments about African benightedness are consistent with her other work, she also suggests a historical evolution that links Christian conversion to a desire for "civil and religious Liberty" and further claims that these two are inseparable. She also reveals a developing sense of her homeland by asking leave of "Modern Egyptians" to assert that the same love of freedom and "impatience of Oppression" found in white Christians is also embedded in those of African descent. Her use of the pronoun "us" marks her as a new African, enlightened, Christian, and freedom-loving.

The last part of the letter is a frontal attack on those who proclaim liberty but hold slaves. While she says that she does not wish them harm, she does seek "to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically opposite" (153). She turns the principles of reason and natural rights into weapons against the defenders of slavery, those very people who have been using them in support of revolution. These "enlightened" men cannot help but utter "strange Absurdities." Given the pretentions of many of the founding fathers, the sarcasm of her final sentence is evident: "How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the Exercise of oppressive Power over others agree,—I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine" (153). Religion, race, and reason come together to suggest her understanding of her situation in the emerging new nation.

The argument, then, comes back to its beginning. Jefferson is one of the best-known deists of that era, author of some of the key documents of American freedom, and unrepentant if not untroubled slave holder. While his attack on Wheatley is published a few months after her death, she would seem to launch here pre-emptive attacks. His assault on her and on blacks generally assumed that they were

[6] Curiously, in one of these letters, Occum refers to Phillis as "the Little Miss." Presumably, this is a term of endearment rather than condescension. Samson Occum to Susannah [sic] Wheatley, 21 September 1773.

incapable of both reason and poetic imagination. What she does here and throughout her religious writings is to shift the terms of the discourse in such a way that she can gain some control over the representation of herself and her race. While she often adopts an apparently self-effacing mode of speaking, she always claims the right of the "Ethiop" to speak to power. She uses precisely those qualities, imagination and reason, she is said to lack. Like David, she takes on the giants on their own turf, and like him, at least in the spiritual sense, emerges the victor.

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Article

"Looking 'Foreword' to Milton in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*"

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Abstract: Prior to the 2014 republication of Toni Morrison's, Paradise, the novelist had not published any commentary about the role of literary influence John Milton might have had on her fictional writings. In a foreword to the republication of her 1997 novel, Morrison offers her first published acknowledgement of Milton's influence on any work in her canon. My essay contends this Miltonic revelation constitutes a groundbreaking event in literary criticism. I explore the critical significance of this revelation by explicating the foreword, Milton's significance within it, and its implications for reading the 17th-century epic writer's (in)visible influential presence throughout *Paradise*. Placing particular emphasis on the interpretive significance of Morrison's womanist critique of Milton's portrayal of Eve, my essay turns to a focus on the Convent women as interrogated replicas of the first mother presented in *Paradise Lost*. This analysis of the novel enlarges the grounds of contention in Milton and African American studies, providing a richer interpretive reading experience that has never been cited or examined in existing literary criticism prior to now.

Keywords: grounds of contention; (in)visible; revisionist interrogation; spiritual translation; uppity; womanist

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The foreword to Toni Morrison's 2014 republication of her 1998 novel, *Paradise*, constitutes a major event in literary criticism. More than a foreword, this brief literary essay on matters of religion, literary culture, and black history breaks new ground in studies devoted to John Milton and African American women's writings. Of particular note, Morrison's Miltonic foreword provides a religious lens for examining and reclaiming a body of African American women's writings where select authors in the tradition adorn their works with the intertextual spirit of Milton's influential and (in)visible presence. These spirit-filled citings of Milton's presence in Morrison's foreword merit serious consideration because of the interpretive implications they hold for comprehending *Paradise* and the Miltonic scope of the novel's artistic complexity. As Morrison's foreword intertextually forecasts, her spiritual meditations on Milton give old and new readers alike something Miltonic to look forward to prior to turning the page to the novel's beginning chapter. From that moment forward, Morrison's readers encounter a novel that performs myriad spiritual and revisionist interrogations of Milton and his signature epic, *Paradise Lost*, toward reclaiming black women's bodies as messianic divas rather than fallen Eves or subjugated Adamic helpmeets.

No criticism prior to this essay exists that theorizes Morrison's intertextual engagements with Milton in *Paradise*. This void in literary criticism robs culture of understanding more fully the poetic genius of one of America's most profound and astutely gifted writers of the past 50 years. *Paradise* marks a critical watershed moment in Morrison's literary career. It is the first novel she published subsequent to winning the Nobel Prize in literature in 1993. Epic in scope and complexity, *Paradise*, fictionally preaches a gospel of black revolt by troping imaginatively with God's religious language and restoring its poetics to literary righteousness in fallen contemporary times.

Bearing Morrison's Soulful Miltonic Witness in *Paradise*

Preaching gospels of black revolt in African American tradition covers a range of politicized literary projects where authors remaster the English language with accented inflections of semantic difference. One of the ways African American writers have showcased their skills in remastering English is by demonstrating a "subversive fluency with Milton" while "completing and complicating" him with erudite sophistication (Wilburn 2014, p. 3). Morrison, extending a tradition inaugurated by Phillis Wheatley, remasters Milton in her own distinct style. As she declared in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "we do language", an act she understood as possibly signaling "the measure of our lives". (Morrison 2019b). To disregard the intertextual weight of her Miltonic heritage, therefore, is tantamount to religious sacrilege, contributing to what may be regarded as a textual bastardization of canonical exegesis that is unworthy of two of the most preeminent and gifted of literary writers in English.

On the one hand, Milton has long been revered as a heroic literary icon in English tradition. To the Victorians, "Milton, like *Hamlet* had become a classic (Gray 2009, p. 35). The literary success accorded to *Paradise Lost*, meanwhile, has shaped interpretations of the impressive religious work as that of "a poetic Bible" (Gray 2009, p. 45). Morrison's prestige in literature will loom equally as large in the future annals of literary history. Subsequent to her death in August of 2019, for example, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. tweeted, "Toni Morrison's funeral on Friday solemnizes the passing of one of the most sublime voices in the history of our country" (Gates 2019). This accolade among others throughout Morrison's impressive 50-year publication career will assure her a formidable presence in canons of literature in English.

In "Getting Uppity with Milton; or Because My Mom Politely Asked: 'Was Milton Racist?'" I clear theoretical space for considering the intertextual weight of Morrison's Miltonic heritage by briefly explaining how England's Christian and epic poet of liberty works in her writings. In addition to reclaiming and revaluing the pejorative term, 'uppity', as a culturally responsive mode of black Miltonic reception and critique, I argue Morrison's various allusions to Milton and *Paradise Lost*, in particular, constitute a "wayward aesthetic that creates intertextual distance from [him] by distorting her many [glosses on] his works so that they are almost beyond recognition" (Wilburn 2020, p. 273). This theoretical intervention in literary criticism provides scholars who read as artists a more nuanced understanding of the Milton Morrison engages throughout several works from her *oeuvre*. Readers as artists, according to Morrison, are notable for "sifting, adding, [and] recapturing" details in literary writings to the point of "making the work work while it makes [them] do the same" (Morrison 2006, p. 175). *Paradise* prompts such activities with its myriad wayward allusions to Milton and his writings. These allusions reveal a pressing need for performing the nuanced work of Miltonic exegesis where examinations of Morrison's novels, and *Paradise* in particular are concerned.

Only three other articles attempt to account for Milton's intertextual relevance or significance in Morrison's writings. Tessa Roynon's two articles on *A Mercy* provide the most substantive discussions of Morrison's Miltonic engagements in any of the novelist's literary works. Roynon's articles focus on the "trope of dominion as a key intertextual motif" and the value of the Miltonic journey as a route to ontologically regaining paradise from within one's individual sense of and quest for self (Wilburn 2020, p. 273). Lauren LePow's notice of Milton in Morrison's *Tar Baby* precedes Roynon's intertextual findings by nearly 25 years. Her reading of *Tar Baby* calls specific attention to an allusive aesthetic operating throughout Morrison's fourth novel where figures of "geographical dualism" ultimately reflect the novelist's "fusing ... antipodal elements of Milton's Hell and Heaven into hybrid signifiers" (Wilburn 2020, p. 272). Joseph Wittreich and Marc Conner also have offered speculations about Milton as critical to Morrison's literary heritage. Both, to differing degrees, validate the capacious range of Morrison's vast and astute knowledge of literary tradition. Wittreich and Conner also highlight Morrison's clever appreciation for one of the most highly praised and revered of poetical writers in the English canon.

A responsible accounting of Morrison's numerous poetic engagements with Milton throughout *Paradise* as forecasted in her Miltonic foreword may best be understood through the lens of Katherine Clay Bassard's theorizations on strands of religious intertextuality as performed by early African American women writers. Bassard identifies and redefines these intertextual practices as "spiritual interrogations". Altered and updated in scope, style, and philosophical outlook, such "revisionist interrogations" surface myriad times throughout *Paradise* and with a Miltonic tenor of intertextual religiosity that has yet to be examined. Revisionist interrogations, according to Bassard, produce performances of intertextual response and reception "from the heart" as prompted by any number of questions raised in or by some precursor text in literary or cultural tradition (Bassard 1999, p. 3). Bassard further explains that it is "within this divine dialogue" between writers separated by dates of publication that "black women's subjectivity is produced even as her agency is acknowledged and affirmed" (Bassard 1999, p. 3). This give-and-take dynamic between and among artists announces a stylized reception of the Miltonic works Morrison signifies upon in her own writings of innovative originality. *A Mercy* attests to this give-and-take exchange with Milton, as Roynon has noted. However, no one has theorized on this exchange as it manifests throughout *Paradise*, the novel where Milton reverberates more numerously than in any of Morrison's literary productions.

Morrison's Miltonic foreword to the millennial republication of *Paradise* justifies and confirms her literary affiliation with Milton that I long suspected prior to 2014 as discussed in my 2020 essay in *Milton Studies*.[1] The foreword's several commentaries on and appropriations of Milton underscore the myriad instances throughout *Paradise* where Morrison tropes with the epic writer so that he remains (in)visible before astute readers' eyes. Inasmuch as her Miltonic foreword is notable for its revelations concerning Milton and *Paradise Lost* as religious intertexts permeating her seventh novel, it turns out that the discussions in the essay are elaborations upon literary meditations Morrison wrote about nearly 25 years earlier but never published. Her Miltonic foreword, then, actually constitutes an expanded literary afterthought that enlarges upon beliefs she held about Milton's linguistic and imagistic value while composing *Paradise*.

One discovers the origins of Morrison's religious meditations on Milton in her essay, "God's Language". A kind of spiritual meditation, "God's Language" likewise functions as intertextual scripture, in effect, removing all doubt that Morrison knows and creatively re-masters Milton according to her own fancy of intellectual genius. Moreover, its meditative reflection renders a gospel of revolt in a brief form of literary criticism that reveals the aesthetic soul underlying Morrison's numerous revisionist interrogations of Milton throughout *Paradise*.

Perhaps, without intending to do so, "God's Language" strikes a religious tone with a thematic message echoically suggestive of John 1.1. In this synoptic gospel of the New Testament, John declares, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God".[2] John's scriptural declaration unequivocally establishes God as the author and embodiment of language. By 1996, when Morrison begins writing *Paradise*, the novelist knows too well that God talk is debased and fallen in her contemporary moment. Meditating on writing for the literary marketplace at a time of mass consumerism and idolatrous capitalism, Morrison chafes at a seeming widespread rejection if not bastardization of religious language and Christian ideology in the fin de siècle of the 20th century.

It seems impossible to Morrison that writers of this period can find a remedy for recuperating or restoring the purity of God's language in modern times and in creative prose writing more specifically. Hence, she decides to reject English with its "paenasistic, rapturous, [and] large words", choosing, instead, to "reveal their consequences" (Morrison 2019a, p. 254). This poetic strategy allows Morrison to bypass what she regards as the corruptible quality of English language and "cliché-ridden

[1] See "Getting Uppity with Milton" in *Milton Studies* 62.2 where I discuss my brief conversation with Morrison about Milton in 2012 and prior to presenting my pre-circulated paper on *A Mercy* at the 2013 convening of the New England Milton Society held at the University of Connecticut.

[2] *John 1.1.*

expressions" laden in any attempt to render "religion-inflected prose narrative" in poetic forms that might "make the experience and journey of faith fresh, as new and as linguistically unencumbered as it was to early believers" in pre-modern times (Morrison 2019a, p. 253). As Morrison relays in her meditative essay, she invests in a poetics that would restore the purity of God talk and derivatives of its Christian language as a noble linguistic field for telling aright the "history of African Americans" (Morrison 2019a, p. 248). Doing so affords her literary opportunities for regaining paradise through creative prose that subsequently positions her to do justice to African American culture and its religious belief systems and ideals without sacrificing "ambiguity, depth, and moral authority" as a fallen poetics "aimed at reinforcement rather than liberation" (Morrison 2019a, p. 253). Indeed, a literary project of this majestic scope aligns with Milton's poetic treatment of language in *Paradise Lost* where he radically "neglects ... rhyme" in favor of blank verse, which, according to him, "is to be esteemed an example set" of recovering "ancient liberty ... to heroic poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming".[3]

An intertextual interplay between Morrison's Miltonic foreword and her novel translates Milton across the annals of time and the color lines of literary tradition. This spiritual conversion of Milton's translatability in African American women's writing reverberates periodically throughout the Miltonic foreword. Functioning as a spiritualized vernacular by this process, Milton also operates as a "hidden transcript" of overlooked influence in readings of select novels by Morrison where he appears (in)visible to all but the most astute and perceptive of literary audiences (Bassard 1999, p. 18). The novel bears soulful witness to this spiritual conversion of Milton, marking Morrison's "uppity" genius with her precursor and *Paradise Lost* by subjecting both religious intertexts to her awesome powers of revisionist interrogation.

In bearing soulful witness to these spiritual conversions in literary tradition, Morrison performs a 'saving change' of revisionist interrogation. That is, she bears soulful witness to Milton's canonical influence and presence throughout literary tradition as "an important dialectical movement" in her writing (Bassard 1999, p. 23). This literary moment also "signals both a departure and an arrival, an eternal continuity of the soul, even as it demands a discontinuity ... in the course of [western culture's] sinful life (Bassard 1999, p. 23). Thus, Morrison's Miltonic foreword reveals a literary quest wherein she attempts to regain Paradise by appealing to the wonder-working powers of religious language and a radical intertextual engagement with Milton. Her radical re-imagining of contemporary society, Edenic myth, and religious language combine to hallow her novel with Milton's accented (in)visible presence. In doing so, Morrison Aretha-izes her fictional gospel of black revolt by moving astute literary readers to "start gettin' the [intertextual] spirit" of Milton in the poetic darkness of the novelist's playful imagination.[4] This soulful witness of allusive feeling re-animates the novel with a religious energy Morrison foretells in her Miltonic foreword.

Spiritual conversions announce the remarkable change that transforms one whose soul has been lost in perdition then found as the result of some salvific happening. The spiritual conversion instantly translates the formerly abject individual to new heights of restorative sublime. Paul of Tarsus experienced such a conversion along a road to Damascus. Select early African American women writers give utterance to their spiritual conversions in different literary genres by engaging with Milton in a variety of poetic manners. Phillis Wheatley, a founding mother in African American literary tradition, gives prophetic voice to the efficacy of this dynamic for black subjects, who, as Bassard notes, are "victims of *cultural* theft and misappropriation" (Bassard 1999, p. 11). In "On Being Brought from

[3] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, "The Verse".

[4] Aretha Franklin, "Spirit in the Dark" (Franklin 1970). The term '*Aretha-izes*' refers to Franklin's uncanny spiritual ability to place her own innovative stamp of genius on her covers of original hits sung by other recording artists. As with Otis Redding's "R-E-S-P-E-C-T", or Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water", Franklin totally reworks and re-masters the original recording, typically surpassing it with a musical excellence that ultimately makes the song uniquely her own.

Africa", for example, Wheatley serves prophetic notice "that *Negros*, black as *Cain*/May be refin'd and join th' angelic train" (Wheatley 2001, p. 13). This sentiment at once espouses an unshakeable belief that Africans, like others of the human race, may be converted, receive salvation from God, and therefore gain the right hand of fellowship as equal citizens of humanity.

Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Rebecca Cox Jackson's respective spiritual biographies offer subsequent examples in African American women's writings that promulgate "the need to attend to the centrality of issues of spirituality in black women's literature" toward better understanding how they represent themselves "as religious subjects with a variety of sacred traditions" (Bassard 1999, p. 141). Morrison extends and worries the line of this spiritual tradition across the centuries of black women's writing by performing spiritual conversions of a different type and to varying effect. In novels like *Tar Baby*, *A Mercy*, *Home*, *God Help the Child*, and *Paradise* most particularly, Morrison engages in a poetics of revisionist interrogation that bears soulful witness to Milton as a rhetorically loaded figure of speech. Both a rhetoric and intertext of "tropological vernacular" in select Morrison novels, Milton provides a "linguistic and textual ground for black intertextuality" (Bassard 1999, pp. 14–15). Additionally, Milton, largely due to his canonical status as a premiere Christian poet in English tradition, operates as a spiritualized vernacular and "hidden transcript" of overlooked influential presence (Bassard 1999, p. 18).

Milton's near (in)visibility in this regard is evidenced by the paucity of criticism that seldom links these two writers. Morrison's Miltonic foreword, however, alters this course in literary history. Bearing soulful witness and testimony to Milton's intertextual value in the writing of *Paradise*, Morrison's foreword performs a spiritual conversion of the epic poet. Authenticating him as a figure and mode of textual intercourse, the artist as writer spiritually interrogates her famous 17th-century precursor, appropriating and revising him at will. Her crossing the color lines of black and white literary traditions convey inflections of poetic creativity that are accented by her double-voiced mastery of English words and 'uppity' genius.

"Gettin' the Spirit in the Dark" of Morrison's Miltonic Foreword

Morrison's Miltonic foreword performs a spiritual conversion of Milton against orthodox type. A preeminent Christian poet in English tradition, Milton and his canon are saturated with receptions of greatness and high literary achievement to the point of being untouchable, or as Harold Bloom has noted, "the great Inhibitor ... , who strangles even strong imaginations in their cradles" (Bloom 1997, p. 32). Morrison spiritually converts this orthodox Milton, appropriating him in her foreword as though she were revering his high status and impressive mark on literary tradition only to subject him to her iconoclastic whim. In the foreword, Morrison spiritually converts Milton into a tropological vernacular of paradoxical collapsibility. That is, she intertextually translates and transforms his orthodox religious meanings by turning the Milton she understood as an "experimental theologian" both upside/down and inside/out as *Paradise* repeatedly evidences through the novelist's wayward aesthetic of Miltonic allusion (Wittreich 2006, p. 192). An example of this spiritual conversion occurs on the level of the title to Milton's "great religious epic" (Wittreich 2006, p. 132). Commenting on Morrison's "fussing over the last word (paradise) of her novel", which she intended originally to be capitalized, Wittreich wonders if the novelist's depth attention to capitalizing the last word of the fictional work reflects her remembrance that the epic "initially appeared as *Paradise lost*" (Wittreich 2006, p. 64). Furthermore, by entitling her novel to suggest an allusive clipping of Milton's epic, Morrison performs a spiritual conversion of the Christian poet in a 'clapback' to religious tradition aimed at restoring a sense of Heaven to be enjoyed in the here and now on earth rather than in some spiritual afterlife.

The foreword's spiritual conversion of Milton into tropological vernacular proves especially significant in the sense that Morrison performs this act of revisionist interrogation through a literary genre of belated prophecy. Forewords offer introductions or prefatory overviews and accountings of some specific aspect of a given literary work. Morrison's foreword to *Paradise* is notable for its author's rendering of the incidents that gave rise to the novel's Miltonic origins. In accounting for

the intertextual role *Paradise Lost* plays in her conception and composition of the novel, Morrison presents introductory remarks with pointed asynchronous timing. Telling the novel's Miltonic origins well after the fact of its first and now second publication, Morrison likewise retrieves the past of her literary imaginings, grounding this re-membering of source material in the 17th-century yet in a genre of essay writing that, by its very name, connotes a performance of forward-looking thinking. This belated prophecy of sorts spiritually converts Milton as literary fodder useful for Morrison's 'uppity' reimagining of Paradise and its transformed meaning in the fallen times of her, then, writing present.

In addition to appropriating an extended passage from Milton's Christian epic in the foreword, Morrison comments and theorizes on other spiritual matters. For instance, she reflects on the extent to which Hell often appeals to audiences more than conceptions of Paradise do. Later, she critiques the limiting role Milton ascribes to Eve in his epic. This limited portrayal, which *Paradise* enlarges upon, correctively responds to Milton's chauvinistic portrayal of Eve, amplifying the first mother of the epic poem in the characters of Morrison's convent women. This revisionist interrogation of Eve contributes to the growing body of feminist criticism in Milton studies. It also solidifies Morrison and her novelistic writings within a literary fellowship I elsewhere identify as "Milton's early black sisterhood" (Wilburn 2013). This chorus of "self-invented women" along with their "evangelical appropriations of Milton" performs various intellectual engagements and revisionist interrogations of the Christian poet such that they and their writings must no longer be confined to the "margins of footnotes" or endnotes in criticism associated with his epic name in literary tradition (Wilburn 2013, p. 260).

Still another evocation of Morrison spiritually converting Milton in her foreword concerns the nuances of womanist theology permeating the essay. The term, "womanist", as coined by Alice Walker, expands the terrain of black feminist studies to include and celebrate unconventional expressions of womanhood and femininity grounded in Africanist experience. A womanist spirit privileges frivolity, a behavior typically regarded as "irresponsible [or] not serious" in nature (Walker 1983, p. xi). Womanism also privileges an uncompromised respect for women's diverse sexualities, their cultures, "emotional flexibility", strength, and commitments to the "survival and wholeness of entire people" (Walker 1983, pp. xi, xii). Combined, these attributes bespeak a rebellious ontological orientation and counter stance to patriarchal norms.

Morrison's Miltonic foreword performs a spiritual conversion of Milton based on the novelist's revisionist interrogations of Eve. In a passage from the essay, Morrison critiques Milton's limited portrayal of Eve throughout his epic. This critique ruptures a "grounds of contention" in Milton studies, what editors, Mark R. Kelley, Michael Lieb, and John T. Shawcross describe as vast ideological terrain that shapes interpretive communities' diverse receptions of precursor works (Kelley et al. 2003, p. 3). Morrison's rupture of this interpretive field breathes womanist life into an old text in literary tradition that not only marginalizes white Eves as subordinate to their Adamic helpmeets but does so to the exclusion of rendering black women visible or worthy of consideration at all. Thus, Morrison's womanist rupture of Milton's limiting portrayal of Eve pays specific attention to gender as a telling "political and social attitude" (Kelley et al. 2003, p. 2). This attitude simultaneously re-informs the interpretation of a major literary work in epic tradition along with its attendant orthodox meanings. These ruptured grounds also impact interpretations of *Paradise Lost* relative to its "period of production" and "any future looked at from that future's contemporaneity". By spiritually converting Milton through a womanist spirit of revisionist interrogation, Morrison imbues her introductory essay with thematic resonances that ultimately constitute the poetic soul of a foreword that bears undeniable witness to the Christian poet's unexplored influential presence.

The foreword spans five-and-a-half pages in length. It begins and ends with Morrison's reflections on her grandfather's influence on her life. His largeness of character, she explains, inspires aspects of characterization, emplotment, and theme in *Paradise*. After speculating on how he successfully managed to acquire literacy while growing up in the south during the second half of the 19th century, Morrison wonders how he could have learned to read since he quit school after attending on the first day. More specifically, she asks, what school in "rural Alabama", might have existed for black children

prior to the *Emancipation Proclamation* at this time?[5] Recognizing a need for earning a living as more practical than attending school, Morrison's grandfather opted for the former. Morrison is equally curious about the methods her grandfather undertook to become literate enough to read the "King James Version of the Bible cover to cover five times" (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). Unable to account for this phenomenon, Morrison proceeds to discussing at length her grandfather's love for reading and its influence on subsequent generations of her family.

By the time of her childhood, reading, for Morrison, signaled "a defiant political act since historically so much effort had been used" to withhold literacy from blacks (Morrison 2014a, p. xii). The activity also nurtured her enduring love for reading black newspapers. Morrison found newspapers especially appealing because the genre contained a "complex record of African American life" (Morrison 2014a, p. xii). Reading these source documents ultimately played a critical role in motivating her to conceive writing the novel that became *Paradise*. While researching and curating materials for *The Black Book*, for example, Morrison became intrigued by 19th-century African American pioneers who charted entrepreneurial paths of westward expansion across the US.[6] Intent on founding exclusive all-black communities that would be free of the racism experienced in the Reconstruction South, these entrepreneurial wayfarers sought geographical refuge out west.

In an Africanist variation on the Eden trope conceived and popularized by Anglo-Americans from the earliest formation of the US, black pioneers of the west sought to make a racial Paradise on earth. Such an Africanist Paradise provided a racial haven for blacks whose existence within the US routinely offered them a hellish condition by contrast. J. Lee Greene notes the Eden trope materializes as "prevalent in the configuration of so many African American novels before and after the 1950s" (Greene 1996, p. 6). *Paradise* evidences its literary affinity with this sub-genre of African American writing, taking cultural inspiration from various advertisements Morrison reviewed when curating material for *The Black Book*.

In reading these newspapers, Morrison was struck by advertisements encouraging blacks to embrace adventures of heading west to establish exclusive racial communities. A number of these clippings promised newcomers a paradisal existence while also warning potential pioneers to "Come Prepared or Not All" (Morrison 2014a, p. xii). For Morrison, this injunction against a marginalized population of an already racially minoritized group implied biases of racial-class exclusivity. Her recognition of this dynamic in African American culture subsequently prompted her to wonder about the workings of caste restrictions within all-black communities modeled on utopian ideals and visions. Several themes and topics emerged for Morrison the more she pondered these ideas. As a result, she set her creative sights on adhering to four poetic tasks. These tasks evolved to highlight several of the antagonistic forces she desired to explore in the utopian novel she began composing.

According to Morrison, she specifically wanted to address questions concerning race, gender, and colorism and the impact these antagonisms might pose for societal members of an all-black community whose founders envisioned a settlement evocative of a racial paradise. This project, she believed, also required an interrogation of Paradise. The interrogation would take on a revisionist scope but not before "exploring" crises of fallenness in black utopian societies from a "reverse" angle or standpoint (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). In other words, Morrison became invested in a literary enterprise focused on entertaining whether or not racial Paradise could exist unsullied by sins of otherness as perpetuated by "black-skinned" citizens rather than white perpetrators of racist and hegemonic violence (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). Holly Flint's assessment of *Paradise* addresses this tenet of the novel. Commenting on dynamics within the all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma, Flint argues the patriarchal community "consigns itself to the same problems ... that have historically undermined (white) America's promise of a cultural paradise where all people would be equal and have equal

5 (Morrison 2014a, p. xi). All subsequent quotations from the essay will be cited parenthetically in endnotes.
6 Morrison edited *The Black Book*, a work comprising newspaper clippings, advertisements, photos, song sheets, and pictures.

voice" (Flint 2006, p. 605). As a result, this black Edenic community exhibits fallenness when its members uncritically succumb to the wiles of several antagonistic threats, namely, colorism, class divisions, and misogyny.

In addition to exploring societal fallenness in the fictional black Edenic community of Ruby, Morrison particularly sets poetic sights on committing to a linguistic project that required deconstructing the workings of patriarchy and matriarchy. Another linguistic project involves experimenting with "disrupt[ing] racial discourse" as a means for emancipating characters from the cant of racist signifiers (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). Each of these projects attests to a poetics of liberation, therefore placing Morrison on Miltonic grounds of contention whereby she commits herself "to rescuing [her] people from bondage" in addition to "revising their liberty and restoring their freedom" (Wittreich 2006, p. 139). Morrison satisfies these poetic impulses by turning to Milton and spiritually converting his epic into an allusive tropological vernacular, critically aware that a literary project of this scope ultimately required her to "examine the [very] definition of paradise" (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). It is at this juncture of her brief essay, that Morrison poetically breathes Miltonic life into her foreword. In doing so, she reveals the literary extent to which Milton figures as the intertextual soul of the foreword and an (in)visible influential presence not to be discounted or overlooked.

Milton's hermeneutic spirit surfaces in the foreword near the middle of the essay when Morrison considers the Christian poet's canonical epic as a signature tropological vernacular for Paradise in the western imagination. Cognizant that "the idea of paradise is no longer imaginable, or, rather . . . over-imagined" contemporarily, Morrison further considers the figure as having "become familiar, commercialized, even trivial" (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). She underscores her reasoning on this point by subsequently appropriating select passages from Book 4 of *Paradise Lost*. Her direct appropriation of Book 4 quotes various lines in a creative style of elliptical enjambment. She, in effect, rewrites numerous descriptive clauses and phrases that span lines 148–247 of Book 4.

Specifically, she reminds readers how "Milton speaks of 'goodliest trees, loaden with fairest fruit, Blossoms and fruits at once of golden hue . . . with gay enameled colours mixed . . . ; of Native perfumes'. Of 'that sapphire fount the crisped brooks, Rolling on orient pearl and sands of gold . . . ' of 'nectar visiting each plant, and fed flowers worthy of Paradise . . . Groves whose rich trees wept-odorous gums and balm; Others whose fruit, burnished with golden rind, Hung amiable, . . . of delicious taste. Betwixt them lawns, or level downs, and flocks Grazing the tender herb'. 'Flowers of all hue and without thorn the rose'. 'Caves of cool recess, o'er which the mantling vine Lays forth her purple grape and gently creeps Luxuriant . . . .'" (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). According to Morrison, these appropriated lines promote an impressionable image of Eden as a "grand" yet "accessible" landscape, one "seductive as though remembered" yet irretrievably ancient as well (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). Here, Morrison argues that the very concept of Milton's depicted Paradise is lost to contemporary culture. However, she duplicates this loss by intertextually curating a series of enjambed phrases and clauses from Book 4. Morrison's verbal performance, in essence, re-members Milton's Edenic passage anew. Moreover, it ultimately rewrites her precursor's Edenic scene via a poetic subtilty of revisionist interrogation that soon introduces Milton as the soulful spirit of Morrison's Miltonic foreword.

This spirit rests, rules, and hovers about the remainder of the foreword and throughout *Paradise* as well. Milton's soulful spirit manifests primarily through Morrison's revisionist interrogation of Miltonic Paradise as a tropological vernacular for debauched or fallen utopian states at the close of the 20th century and into present times. This vernacular, as we shall see throughout the foreword and the novel, recognizes the concept of Paradise as available only in debauched terms. Hence, Morrison takes poetic liberties with Milton's Eden through a tropological procedure that ironically checks or undermines its positive symbolic connotations. In doing so, Morrison strategically links this revisionist symbolic figure with connotations of satanic fallenness.

By undermining Paradise and its once positive symbolic connotation, Morrison performs a transvaluation of the Edenic signified through a style of creative language that Danielle A. St. Hilaire elsewhere identifies as "satan's poetry". This poetic speech act, modeled after Milton's Satan, constitutes

a performance of creative writing that proves "a distinctly fallen activity" (St. Hilaire 2012, p. 3). As St. Hilaire explains, this verbal art form figures as satanic "not because it is somehow evil, but because the language in which poetry speaks is a product of the Fall" (St. Hilaire 2012, p. 3). The remaining passages from Morrison's Miltonic foreword theorizes the canonical weight of his influence on the western literary and cultural imaginations in language that speaks in echoic tongues of Satan's poetry. Allusively channeling the infernal hero from *Paradise Lost*, Morrison adopts fallen poetic language as a mode for theorizing her understandings of contemporary culture as analogous to Satan deigning to "make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n" (*PL* 1.255). Satan's perversion of goodness for evil purposes occurs through a language of poetic re-creation. Morrison's foreword and novel privileges this manner of poetic speech as well, thereby enlarging a ground of Miltonic contention in Milton studies that secures a womanist space for African American women writers of various literary persuasions to occupy as theologians of a liberating gospel.

Morrison begins preaching a literary gospel of Milton criticism in the foreword when the essay segues to an examining of Paradise and its conceptual perversion in contemporary culture. In a sarcastic tone laced with ironic wit, Morrison asserts "Milton's Paradise is quite available these days, if not in fact certainly as ordinary, unexceptional desire" (Morrison 2014a, pp. xiii–xiv). This debauched sense of Paradise exists in the form of "bounded real estate owned by the wealthy and envied by the have-nots" (Morrison 2014a, p. xiii). Morrison also notes this debauched sense of Paradise specifically flourishes in perverted characteristics like "beauty, plenty, rest, [and] exclusivity" (Morrison 2014a, p. xiv). Each of these Edenic characteristics highlights individual and social practices involving the controlling or raping of nature and its resources, luxuriating in greed and excess to the envy of the have-nots, outcasting the less privileged, and/or perverting ideals of rest to the point of redefining the concept as synonymous with laziness.

Perversions of Paradise also flourish in other aspects of contemporary life according to Morrison. For instance, she notes a perversion of exclusivity operates to keep the marginalized and disenfranchised from ever being able to afford living within the paradisal geographies of the wealthy. This "popular yearning of the middle class" announces the onset of a new perversion where the vainglorious pursuit of attaining Paradise reflects a debauchery tinged with capitalistic greed (Morrison 2014a, p. xiv). Similarly, a concept like "eternity" undergoes perverse transformation as individuals turn to pursuing its "earthbound" attainment as opposed to remaining content in achieving this spiritual Paradise in afterlife (Morrison 2014a, p. xiv). In each of these instances, Paradise connotes what Morrison recognizes "as an earthly project as opposed to a heavenly one" (Morrison 2014a, p. xiv). These Edenic perversions, she argues, have "serious intellectual and visual limitations" to the point of underscoring just how fallen contemporary society has become relative to the debauched conception of Paradise typical of the contemporary moment (Morrison 2014a, pp. xiv–xv). Overall, Morrison's theoretical outlook on Paradise within the poetic imagination of conceptual ideation materializes what she recognizes as a collective renouncing of any earthly need for attaining a heavenly Paradise at all. This spiritual understanding of society's ideological fallenness motivates her to perform further revisionist interrogations of Milton's epic that are grounded in her satanic readings of Hell and the exciting drama it has generated for centuries.

Swerving from a geographical preoccupation with Paradise, Morrison shifts to focusing on literary depictions of Hell and the appeal this demonic landscape holds for audiences throughout history. "Dante's Inferno beats out Paradisio every time", she asserts, while also noting, "Milton's brilliantly rendered pre-paradise world, known as Chaos, is far more fully realized than his Paradise" (Morrison 2014a, p. xv). For Morrison, a reason for this contrast owes to the signifying properties of language. Hell's "visionary language of the doomed reaches heights of linguistic ardor with which language of the blessed and saved cannot compete", she explains (Morrison 2014a, p. xv). Moreover, "the hell of everyday life" tends to provide far more excitement or drama than the quietude and "outwitting [of] evil" that paradise offers its inhabitants (Morrison 2014a, p. xv). Morrison's recognition

of the linguistic ardor associated with Hell's language and satanic poetry more specifically accords with theories postulated by several prominent critics in Milton studies.

For instance, Stanley Fish, discussing the austere sublime of God's language in *Paradise Lost*, recognizes the Creator/Father's speech acts as expressive of natural purity. That is, his method of presentation is "determinedly non-affective" with the "form of his discourse ... determined by the nature of the thing he contemplates" (Fish 1997, p. 62). Fish further notes, "the names God imposes reflect the accuracy of his perception rather than his attitude toward the objects named" (Fish 1997, p. 64). Additionally, Fish understands Milton's God as "the perfect name-giver whose word *is* the thing in all its aspects" and the "self-generating exposition of what is" (Fish 1997, p. 65). The Father's language starkly contrasts that of Milton's infernal hero. As Neil Forsyth explains, it is Milton's infernal hero who provides the "satanic epic" with much of its animating rhetorical energy of rebellion in addition to playing a primary role in arousing the "strength and eloquence of the passions" that make reading *Paradise Lost* such an exhilarating experience (Forsyth 2003, p. 5). St. Hilaire extends this line of criticism when she acknowledges "Satan's unique status among epic characters" as pertaining to his "possessing a strange agency", one founded "on a denial of the most powerful Creator in the poem" (St. Hilaire 2012, p. 23). Because the infernal hero's poetry of "satanic creation" emerges from his rebellious decision to "re-create himself in a different image" other than God intended him to be, his speech acts affirm Morrison's astute understanding of Hell's linguistic ardor throughout western culture (Forsyth 2003, p. 18). This same duality of spirit inspires Morrison's hellish tropological engagements and revisionist interrogations of Milton's epic.

Like the school of British Romantics or "English Jacobins" who Mary Nyquist identifies as devoted to a spirit of "first-generation Satanism", Morrison, too, knowingly writes herself into the devil's party (Nyquist 2014, pp. 220, 222). For Nyquist, Satanism reflects a "capacious magnetic field" of the poetic sublime (Nyquist 2014, p. 221). Within the contexts of a Miltonic sublime, Satanism balances supernal and infernal properties by aesthetically twinning elements of good and evil. This aesthetic "attracts both affective energies and progressive political platforms" while displaying a given literary artist's "heightened sensibility and enlightened 'genius'" (Nyquist 2014, p. 221). Morrison's recognition of Hell's gravitational pull on audiences' cognitive reading practices will inform a salient aesthetic operating throughout her canon whenever she elects to trope with Milton from rhetorical distances that distort him beyond clear recognition. Simultaneously holding figures of Heaven and Hell in rhetorical balance, she fuses both, therefore "confound[ing] the human mind by intimating divine grandeur as well as the revolutionary prospect of revolutionary change" (Nyquist 2014, p. 221). Channeling Miltonic Satanism in this mode echoes the plundering of Paradise that reverberates throughout Milton's epic, surfaces periodically in select passages from Morrison's foreword, and in her novel as well.

A subsequent paragraph in the foreword checks and undermines the concept of Paradise once again by introducing a womanist critique of Milton's Eve. "Notable in Milton's Paradise is the absence of women", Morrison states. This evaluative assessment takes Milton to special task for portraying Eve in a limited fashion. Eve, from Morrison's perspective, is afforded "the most prominent space" in Paradise. Yet, her subordinated position in the epic proves far from ideal. She seemingly has nothing more to do in Paradise than to tend to its bounteous garden. "Progeny apparently is not required", Morrison sarcastically muses (Morrison 2014a, p. xv). Querying Eve's status in the epic further, she asks, "besides caretaking what is there for women to do?" (Morrison 2014a, p. xv). These concerns critique Milton's portrayal of Eve as little more than a helpmeet of negated presence within the epic. *Paradise* radically revises this limited reading of Eve, rewriting the first mother as a tropological basis for the several revisionist interrogations Morrison performs when spiritually converting Milton's Eve in the image of her several womanist divas and evangelists.

Paradise will spiritually interrogate Milton's Eve by centering women characters as collective protagonists in the novel. Interestingly, Morrison's narrator in the opening chapter identifies the five Convent women as "Bodacious Black Eves" (Morrison 2014b, p. 18). Identified as bodacious in the sense that they conduct themselves in ways that patriarchal culture deems antithetical to conventions

of true womanhood, the men from the nearby town of Ruby, Oklahoma certainly regard the Convent women as unorthodox. As Mix explains, "the men come to the Convent because they wish to reassert a particular order—one that positions these women as wicked bodies that must be destroyed" (Mix 2015, p. 166). Because these Adamic patriarchs consider their bodacious Eve-like neighbors responsible for the moral decline occurring within Ruby, they invade the Convent with the express purpose of eradicating them from the vicinity. Their misogynist and fallen illogic lead them to "shoot the white girl first" as the opening sentence of the novel indicates (Morrison 2014b, p. 3). Not until late in the crisis stage of plot does the narrator reveal the men's motivations for invading the Convent.

They shoot to maim and/or kill because they regard the women as heretically unfeminine, satanic, and a threat to their paradisal community. Like patriarchal demons, then, the men from Ruby invade the Convent, fearing these bodacious Eves constitute a threat to their community's survival. Morrison resurrects these Eve-like characters from death in the climax and the *denouement* of the novel. This spiritual translation of their collective characters elevates them to an office of womanist divines who selflessly "shoulder the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise" on earth (Morrison 2014b, p. 318). It is through this perfecting work of characterization that Morrison likewise performs an amplified revisionist interrogation of Milton's Eve. Translating the Convent women from their hellish sufferings to states of Paradise and celestial ministries on Earth, Morrison re-creates these bodacious Eves in the transfigured likeness of womanist divas. Morrison's womanist critique of Milton's Eve in the foreword alludes to the amplified revisionist interrogations of that character as evidenced by the novel's transfigured Convent women.

Another section in the Miltonic foreword worthy of attention concerns Morrison's poetic interest in plundering paradise on grounds of contention inflected by linguistic codes of racelessness. After critiquing Milton's limiting portrayal of Eve, Morrison discusses her aesthetic interest in playing manipulatively with the language of race in a rather unique way. She admits to experimenting with a form of writing invested in "disrupt[ing] the assumptions of racial discourse" through "race-specific/race-free prose" (Morrison 2014a, p. xv). This linguistic experiment aims to emancipate the English language from its racist cant and the racially biased interpretations of characters made by ill-informed readers.

Aware that racializing discourse contributes to practices of dehumanization in reading and interpretation, Morrison experiments with race-specific/race-free prose so literary audiences become empowered to read her characters more critically, with greater empathy, and as "fully realized individuals—whatever their race" (Morrison 2014a, p. xvi). Troping with race through this poetic mode aids Morrison in neutralizing colonialist language. The device also emancipates audiences from the "wearying vocabulary of racial domination", which, as she argues, both "limits" and "imposes" upon diverse readers' imaginations to the detriment of honoring an equality of verisimilitude relative to the black characters she creates (Morrison 2014a, p. xvi). Whereas Milton rebelliously adopts blank verse in *Paradise Lost* as a means for recovering "ancient liberty ... to heroic poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming", Morrison takes strident poetic liberties of her own in her novel. Specifically, she ruptures racial language as an emancipating discourse of freedom.[7] She, too, aspires to restore freedom by investing in a poetic project where "narrative seeks to unencumber itself from the limit that racial language imposes upon the imagination" (Morrison 2014a, p. xvi).

The Miltonic foreword nears its close with Morrison addressing the novel's more prominent themes and antagonistic conflicts. Morrison notes these conflicts are "gender-related and generational", sometimes extending to competitive "struggles over history" or ownership rights concerning the telling or controlling of a paradisal community's historical narrative and future (Morrison 2014a, p. xvi). Additional conflicts include the ethical choices and social mores of her multiple characters or experiences borne by those whose various identity politics challenge the ideologically fallen to re-imagine Paradise

[7] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, "The Verse", 2.

as an Edenic site of inclusiveness. Morrison explores these and other dynamics in *Paradise* because she finds spiritually interrogating them as "most compelling when augmented by yearnings for freedom and safety" within contemporary culture" (Morrison 2014a, p. xvii). Most important, she recognizes these explorations as critical for reimagining Paradise as it could be if not for the numerous perversions contributing to its debauched conception presently.

Reimagining Edenic culture through a mode of revisionist interrogation is Morrison's poetic method for conveying the sense that all is not lost in the fallen Paradise of our contemporaneity. Catherine Gray and Erin Murphy's thoughts on a new brand of Milton criticism in the 21st century helps to clarify why Morrison's reimagining of Paradise proves significant. According to them, a new mode of Milton criticism participates in "connecting [his] particular historical moment to a 'now' that unfolds in the mind's eye infused with futurity, potential, and hope" (Gray and Murphy 2014, p. 3). As Morrison further explains in the foreword, she devotes herself to reimagining and expanding Paradise toward emancipating its constrained and antiquated conceptions, which routinely are empty of usefulness or concrete meaning. She also seeks to free up imaginative space so attaining or regaining Paradise might occur in the here and now rather than the forestalled hope of inhabiting it in the afterlife. Regaining Paradise in this regard, according to Morrison, proceeds "by the search for one's own space, for respect, love, [and] bliss ... [and as] an interrogation into the narrow imagination that conceived and betrayed" its conception in the first place (Morrison 2014a, p. xvii). It is on these grounds of contention, interpretation, and reception that Morrison closes her Miltonic foreword with a sympathetic nod to "Big Papa", the grandfather who "didn't exert power" but, rather, "assumed it" (Morrison 2014a, p. xvii). Big Papa helped Morrison to "understand and create the men in Ruby", the fallen Adamic patriarchs whose "easy assumption of uncontested authority" ultimately impacts the novelist's revisionist interrogations of Milton's Eve (Morrison 2014a, p. xvii). Overall, Morrison's foreword gives readers something Miltonic to look forward to before turning the page and encountering the allusive spirit of Milton influential presence as early as the novel's first chapter.

Paradise and the Literary Reclaiming of Morrison's Miltonic Convent Women

The religious (in)visible spirit characterized by Milton's influential presence throughout *Paradise* surfaces by way of Morrison's poetic treatment of the novel's geographical setting. The opening chapter, "Ruby" is named after the deceased daughter of one of the exclusive all-black town's founding fathers. Additionally, the character of the Ruby community symbolizes a replica of an Africanist Eden. Mark A. Tabone, for instance, argues "the all-black town of Ruby is readily recognizable as the absolutely sealed-off enclave of the classical 'modern' utopia" (Tabone 2016, p. 132). A competing symbolic Paradise exists not far from the town of Ruby, however. Bringing to mind the dualism Lebow examines in her reading of *Tar Baby*, Tabone notes, "the small all-women community known as the Convent resembles the 'postmodern' utopias of the 60s and 70s" (Tabone 2016, p. 132). Patriarchal receptions of the Convent women, though, perceive the edifice and its inhabitants as satanically fallen. Notwithstanding this fallen reading of the Convent and its female inhabitants, Morrison promotes an even stronger association with Paradise and Milton's epic at the end of the chapter when her omniscient narrator describes the allegedly fallen protagonists as bodacious black Eves. Associating the women with Eve assumes even greater symbolic meaning based on the allusive and poetic significance of their collective names. Each woman's name in some way designates her as fit to assume the ministry of uplifting the spiritually desolate. Collectively, then, Morrison's bodacious black Eves are poised to facilitate healing by the *denouement* of the novel. It is just prior to this moment in the plot structure that the narrator reveals the Convent women's spiritual translation. Their translation elevates them to an angelic office, a literary reclaiming of their bodies that resurrects them to a Miltonic status of messianic divas.

At the start of the novel, which really begins like an epic, *in media res*, only Consolata, or Connie is fit to serve as a womanist messiah and spiritual divine. Throughout the novel, her character serves as a kind of spiritual mother to the four troubled women who arrive at the Convent at different moments

throughout the crisis stages of plot. For most of the novel, Connie appears to exist as little more than an elderly caretaker for the women arriving at the Convent. By the crisis stage of plot, however, *Paradise* associates her character with Eve, describing her adulterous affair with Deek Morgan through imagistic language that Deborah M. Mix recognizes as imbued with "Edenic resonances" (Mix 2015, p. 177). This Edenic language ultimately casts Connie in a "prelapsarian role [suggestive] of Eve", Mix explains (Mix 2015, p. 177). Symbolically, and as her formal name connotatively suggests, Connie possesses a spiritual gift of compassionately consoling the grieved and bereaved. Readers realize the spiritual dimensions of Connie's ministerial gifts near the close of the chapter named after her.

From the moment the narrator introduces Connie, readers gain a sense of her spiritual nature. Exhibiting clairvoyant certitude almost immediately after meeting Mavis, Connie chides the first of her womanist mentees for lying to her. Mavis lies to Connie, claiming she is not "a drinking woman" when asked (Morrison 2014b, p. 38). Connie's clairvoyant reprimand solidifies an interpretation of her as spiritually gifted and induces Mavis to confess the truth concerning her drinking habits. Not long after this exchange, Connie excuses herself from the kitchen so she can attend to the care-taking needs of Mary Magna, the ailing elderly Mother Superior who lives upstairs. Soane Morgan, a neighbor from Ruby, soon visits the Convent while Connie attends to Mary Magna's needs. As Soane and Mavis introduce themselves and become better acquainted with each other, Connie returns to the kitchen without either woman hearing her approach. The narrator, describing Connie's silent return, notes her "entrance was like an apparition" (Morrison 2014b, p. 43). This description of Connie's apparitional re-appearance builds off of the narrator's earlier characterization of the seer's clairvoyant spiritual talents. Connie's divine nature becomes more pronounced in the "Divine" chapter where she is seen working her spiritual "magic" on another of her Convent mentees (Morrison 2014b, p. 173). While welcoming Pallas into her lap, for instance, Connie successfully encourages the wounded young woman to cry, tell her story, and begin releasing her pains. Previously, Pallas had been reluctant to express her emotional pains.

Connie especially works her spiritual magic in the "Consolata" chapter during a ritual of womanist healing. She presides over her spiritual mentees who are "like maidens entering a temple or a crypt" (Morrison 2014b, p. 222). Together, they descend to the basement to be purged of the various traumas associated with their respective failed relationships. Traumatized particularly by "men who once had desperately loved" them, or as the narrator adds, "should have ... might have ... or would have" the Convent women benefit from their spiritual mother's womanist magic (Morrison 2014b, pp. 222–23). At the end of the chapter in still another moment underscoring Connie's ministerial prowess, she exclaims to her mentees, "I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here [,] you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for" (Morrison 2014b, p. 262). Shortly thereafter, she preaches an autobiographical sermonette, instructing the women to honor equally the bones of their bodies and the flesh that is spirit. "Where is it lost?" she asks before exclaiming, "Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve" (Morrison 2014b, p. 262). These rhetorical tautologies concerning bone/body, spirit/flesh, and Eve/Mary express a womanist theology designed to empower Connie's spiritual mentees to become imparadised within themselves notwithstanding their dichotomous natures.

The Convent women come to a greater knowledge of themselves and experience spiritual purgation following Connie's sermonette. By the end of the chapter, in fact, the final lines of the chapter reveal the Convent women "were no longer haunted" (Morrison 2014b, p. 266). This revelation suggests the women have been emancipated from their respective traumas via Connie's unconventional rituals of womanist healing. Ironically, their emancipation culminates in setting the stage for their physical demise which the novel's opening chapter already has suggested and the spiritual translation which will be revealed in the final stages of plot. By this point in the novel, Morrison, in addition to highlighting Connie's spiritual gifts of consolatory uplift, has fully characterized the womanist Reverend or "secular Mother Superior" as a reimagined Miltonic Eve (Mix 2015, p. 170). Connie's

Eve-like nature is not limited to an intertextual association with the Biblical account rendered in *Genesis*. Morrison allusively hallows Connie's character with Miltonic resonances when associating her character with Christ's College, the institution where Milton earned baccalaureate and master's degrees. Two paragraphs later, Morrison associates Connie with Milton more specifically by characterizing the setting and episodic incidents with *Areopagitica* and *Eikonoklastes*, two of the 17th-century epic writer's most iconic political tracts.[8]

Mavis' poetic name extends Morrison's revisionist interrogation of Milton's Eve. In English, the name Mavis identifies a "songbird" of the thrush variety. A songbird's musical abilities can uplift the spirits of the downtrodden. In this symbolic sense, Mavis' name characterizes her as one gifted in providing inspiriting consolation to others through a ministry of song. Grace, another of the troubled and dispirited Convent women, arrives at Connie's residence seeking spiritual relief. She is known affectionately as Gigi throughout the novel. Her name, too, resonates closely with a divinely endowed spiritual ministry. In particular, her birth given name denotes the handiwork of God's favor. Thus, her name also symbolically personifies her as representative of virtue, mercy, and the dispensing of liberal compassion. In French, the name identifies her as an "earth worker". These combined meanings characterize Grace as a gracious spirit, symbolically outfitting her for a ministry geared to the selfless supporting of the disconsolate and spiritually wounded.

Seneca is another of Morrison's Eve-like characters. Her name instantly highlights Morrison's classical heritage. Morrison playfully bends this heritage to reveal her ongoing revisionist interrogations of Milton and his signature epic. The namesake of the famous tragedian and philosopher, Seneca, initially spurs a recollection of the influential contributions to stoic philosophy made by her Roman precursor in antiquity. The stoic philosopher's contributions to the branch of virtue and personal ethics holds symbolic implications for the character bearing his name in Morrison's novel. On one level, Morrison's practice of poetic naming spurs an interpretation of this womanist character as potentially poised to perform a ministry of consolatory uplift. Seneca's name also underscores the esteemed worth of her consolatory ministry since her namesake in Roman antiquity ranks among the most celebrated of tragedian writers. Viewed from this aspect of the womanist character's classical name, Morrison's revisionist play with classical culture qualifies the character of Seneca's consolatory ministry. In particular, her name suggests her spiritual ministry especially attends to uplifting those whose existence seems bound in the crucible of tragic life experiences.

It also is worth noting that Morrison's poetic naming of Seneca's character is not limited to the tragedian and stoic philosopher. The character's name also highlights Mlilton's (in)visibility as an allusive influential presence throughout the novel. Seneca's Miltonic name characterizes her with a tenor of allusive wit grounded in Morrison's innovative style of satanic poetry. First, Seneca arrives in town having stowed herself away in "the bed of a brand-new '73 pickup" (Morrison 2014b, p. 126). Upon reaching Ruby's town limits, she jumps out of the vehicle and immediately begins walking alongside Sweetie, a character, who at this point in the novel, suffers a state of temporary madness and despair. Sweetie heads to the Convent, desperately seeking Connie's spiritual healing and guidance. Seneca, in pain herself, follows Sweetie without knowing she will be healed from her spiritual infirmities also. Meanwhile, readers have yet to discover the allusive extent to which Morrison's Seneca is worthy to be compared to the character *Sin* from *Paradise Lost*.

The playful Miltonic contours associated with Seneca's name begins to materialize the more the narrator chronicles the character's faithful devotion to Sweetie as both women make their way to the Convent. Almost instantly, Seneca tends to Sweetie by draping the troubled woman in her serape. Seneca soon introduces herself to Sweetie only to be ignored by her. At one point as they head to the Convent, Sweetie turns to acknowledge her "uninvited companion", noting to herself, "Sin . . . ,

[8] In a subsequent essay on *Paradise*, I continue examining Morrison's playful allusions to Milton where her sophisticated wordplay with Christ College, Connie's burning of books, and her destruction of profane Christian iconography ground the novel's poetic aesthetic in aspects of the 17th-century writer's educational background and select political writings.

I am walking next to sin and wrapped in its cloak" (Morrison 2014b, p. 129). By the time she and Seneca see the Convent in view, Sweetie considers herself "grateful to be so clearly protected from and unassociated with the sin shape walking next to her" (Morrison 2014b, p. 129). After they arrive on the Convent grounds, Sweetie, according to the narrator, "slogged up the driveway", leaving "the demon" beside her to do the rest" (Morrison 2014b, p. 129). Subsequent paragraphs repeatedly refer to Seneca either as a demon or an "it". Both references portray Seneca as more monstrous than human. The "Divine" chapter characterizes Seneca as demonic also. Throughout this chapter, for instance, the Convent women abbreviate Seneca's name by calling her "Sen" instead. This term of endearment solidifies Morrison's style of Miltonic characterization by playing allusively and homonymously with Milton's *Sin* from Book 2 of his epic.

Sin, makes her infamous appearance in Book 2 of *Paradise Lost* when Satan encounters her as he makes his fugitive escape from Hell. Satan does not recognize *Sin* at first, for he has been estranged from his daughter-consort and their son, *Death*, for some time. Morrison allusively revises the character of Milton's *Sin* by tropologically making a homonym of Seneca's clipped name, which subsequently associates her with the "portress from Hell" in *Paradise Lost* (Milton 2004). That Seneca proves quite flirtatious and sexually promiscuous heightens this comparative reading of both characters. For Mix, Seneca represents one of two Convent women whose bodies constitute "sources of betrayal and humiliation" (Mix 2015, p. 171). As a result, they arrive at the Convent traumatically impacted by years of sexual abuse.

Pallas is the second of these two Eve-like outlaws. As her name allusively suggests, she is associated primarily with Homeric epic, namely, the Greek goddess, Pallas Athena from *The Odyssey*. Homer is not the only precursor in epic writing Morrison appeals to in this poetic naming of one of the Convent women. Milton likewise serves as a source origin for this allusive play with precursors in literary tradition. Interestingly, Pallas' father is named *Milton* Truelove. Her mother's name is "Divine", a poetic signifier that confers goddess status upon the maternal character. Each of these familial names relate to epic tradition in some way. That Morrison includes Milton's name within this symbolic family only enhances the Christian poet's profile as an (in)visible influential presence operating throughout *Paradise* and Morrison's characterization of her Eve-like Convent women.

The above explications evidence Morrison's skill in playfully naming the Convent women in such a way as to provoke different types of allusive interrogations with Milton's epic and Eve in particular. On the one hand, Morrison invites a reading of these womanist divas-in-training as muse-like goddesses. As muse-like divas-in-training, Morrison's Convent women possess names symbolically associating them with ministries of consolatory uplift. Because they also symbolize 'bodacious' black Eves, each is poised for divine greatness. They achieve divine status in the *denouement* where Morrison resurrects these characters from death by spiritually translating them into divas and womanist messiahs.[9] Leading up to the *denouement*, which occurs near the end of the "Save Marie" chapter, Mavis, Grace, Seneca, and Pallas return to their respective sites of traumatization where their individual stories began. They return to these sites either to reclaim an item dear to them or to reconnect temporarily with an estranged loved one.

The final paragraphs of the novel accord with these women's subsequent spiritual translation by presenting Connie in the lap of Piedade, an Afro-Brazilian divine who sings a consolatory song of uplift to the Reverend mother who has been changed supernaturally as well. Piedade's appearance at the end of *Paradise* is significant in the sense that she "represents a resolution of the Eve/Mary, body/spirit tension that animates the action of the novel" and is implicated more profoundly during Connie's earlier sermonic ritual in the "Consolata" chapter (Mix 2015, p. 185). The narrator, commenting on Piedade and Connie's closing moments together, explains that the former's lyrics "evoke memories

[9] Morrison continues to forge an association with Milton's Eve in her 2006 novel, *A Mercy*. Specifically, Morrison's narrator comments on Eve, who, "confused about her role" as Adam's subordinated helpmeet, constitutes "the first outlaw". See (Morrison 2018, p. 115).

neither one has ever had", namely that of enjoying "the unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home—the ease of coming back to love begun" (Morrison 2014b, p. 318). This reflection resonates as an echo of Morrison's concluding statements in her Miltonic foreword where she acknowledges her novel's entertaining myriad questions associated with reimagining paradise as grounded in "the search for one's own space, for respect, love, [and] bliss" (Morrison 2014a, p. xvii). In other words, the conclusion of *Paradise* gestures toward a redefining of the concept by spiritually translating Connie and her womanist sisterhood into messianic angels who may be found ministering to humanity by watching over us all day and all night.[10] It is the sacredness of Piedade and Connie's shared moment of spiritual intimacy at the close of the novel that retrieves, restores, and regains Paradise from ideological loss as a favorably available concept in contemporary times. Morrison's closing image in the novel especially secures this project of radical reimagining.

The closing paragraph of the novel brings. Morrison's reimagining of Paradise into clearer focus. An approaching ship staffed by crew and filled with passengers who the narrator classifies as the "lost and saved" sail into Piedade and Connie's view (Morrison 2014b, p. 318). These sailing wayfarers approach the coast "atremble", for as the narrator explains, they "have been disconsolate for some time" (Morrison 2014b, p. 318). The arrival of the disconsolate passengers proves significant to Morrison's project of reimagining Paradise because the concluding sentence of the novel indicates the role Piedade and Connie will play in the spiritual lives of the lost and saved. At this closing moment of the novel, Piedade and Connie enjoy their final moments of peaceful solitude "before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise" (Morrison 2014b, p. 318). With this closing line, Morrison's narrator implies Connie has been translated spiritually to that of a messianic divine and womanist emancipator for those who have lost Paradise within themselves. She, along with the other Convent women who have been resurrected from death several paragraphs earlier, experience spiritual translation from their former selves as black and bodacious Eves that the narrator first mentioned at the close of the novel's opening chapter. Indeed, they have been changed and spiritually translated to epic womanist divas by the *denouement*. Collectively, then, their new spiritual ministry on earth now defies the demonic grounds of fallen geographic space and conventional timeframes simultaneously.

This ending also makes clear Morrison's messianic divas are not to be reduced to a static angelic image that merely consigns them to passive ministerial acts. Rather, as Mix argues, these more than "gentle angels", these "warriors", womanist divas, and messiahs "offer healing but [are] also prepared to refuse comfort, to seek retribution, and, when necessary, to fight" (Mix 2015, p. 184). Morrison's angelic and messianic divas, therefore, evidence the strains of religious duality, both the secular and carnal and divine spirituality that many a Romantic reader has admired in Milton's Satan. African American readers and writers have long sympathized with this uppity and rebellious reading of Milton's infernal hero as well. In particular, writers of the tradition "gravitate to … [Milton's] satanic energy" because they "identify with [the infernal hero] for messianic purposes that proclaim and advocate causes of black freedom" (Wilburn 2014, p. 14). Through this spiritual transvaluation of their characters, Morrison, "renders the Convent women as empowered agents in a world that has been *totally* transformed to accommodate their impossible presence" (Tabone 2016, p. 140). This technique enhances Morrison's overall project of reimagining Paradise in the 'now' of readers' contemporaneity as opposed to forestalling the promise of regaining it in afterlife.

Paradise foreshadows this rupture of geographical space and conventional time earlier in the "Save-Marie" chapter when the married couple, Richard and Anna Flood, return to the Convent grounds to verify whether the rumored "mass disappearance" of its occupants is true or not

[10] It, perhaps, is not coincidental that Morrison publishes *Paradise* one year after the release of Richard Smallwood's *Adoration*, the 1996 recording that in addition to containing the widely popular song, "Total Praise", also includes the equally favorite, "Angels", a contemporary gloss on the old-time gospel tune that relays, "all day, all night, the angels watchin' over me my Lord". I contend Morrison's muse-like/Eve-like divas epitomize the reimagining of Paradise through their womanist roles as ministering angels and messianic emancipators at the close of the novel and beyond.

(Morrison 2014b, p. 303). Having surveyed the Convent grounds, the Floods return to their vehicle in a passage that allusively reverses Adam and Eve's departing exile from Eden. This spiritual interrogation of Book 12 from Milton's epic, presents the Floods, who, with a backward-facing glance, evoke a recall of Adam and Eve as they, too, "looking back, all th' eastern side beheld / Of Paradise, so late their happy seat/Waved over by that flaming brand".[11] When the Floods look back, they view a mysterious sign neither clearly comprehends. For instance, the narrator explains, "They saw it. Or sensed it, rather, for there was nothing to see" (Morrison 2014b, p. 305). What seems a "door" to Anna and a "window" to Richard, the narrator identifies as a mysterious "sign" (Morrison 2014b, p. 305). Though the sign proves a mystery to the married couple, its significance sharpens in interpretive clarity by the end of the novel when Piedade and Connie prepare to shoulder their messianic ministries for the salvific benefit of the lost and saved. Morrison's reimagined Paradise in this sense, then, spiritually interrogates the indelible Edenic image Milton's epic foregrounds and bequeaths to western civilization. She achieves this reimagining of Paradise by radically reconfiguring the setting of the novel at the *denouement* as a "place of eternal other-worldy bliss of which Christianity speaks" (Stave 2014, p. 318). She, in effect, re-creates Heaven on Earth so the humans of the fictional world she creates no longer have to wait to enjoy Paradise in the afterlife. With the help of the spiritually translated Convent women, the disconsolate peopling Morrison's fictional world can be uplifted to new heights of sublime on Earth and enjoy Paradise in the here and now.

The Convent women's spiritual translation is prefigured by the foreshadowing and mysterious sign the Floods are unable to comprehend prior to the novel's ending. The narrator questions the interpretive indeterminacy of the mysterious sign as the Floods struggle to comprehend its meaning. "Whether through a door needing to be opened or a beckoning window already raised", the narrator offers, "what would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth?" (Morrison 2014b, p. 305). The *denouement* makes evident that Connie and her Eve-like sisters exist in another spiritual dimension and in a different world of spatiotemporal reality. Such an episodic rupture, as Grattan observes, structurally tropes with "space and time between the first and eight chapters" as "the expression of . . . a utopian enclave" (Grattan 2013). This reading of the novel's structure recognizes Morrison's manipulation of literary form as both a poetics and interpretive framework for rupturing and reimagining Paradise on the level of the book itself. Apart from Morrison's characters, digressive plots, and elements of storytelling, the novel ruptures time and geographical space as stylistic utterances of literary form that facilitate a regaining of Paradise for the Convent women who are spiritually translated to the womanist office of messianic divas by the *denouement*.

With this structure of literary form in mind, Morrison's spiritual translation of the Convent women outside and beyond this spatiotemporal dimension, answers the questions posed by the narrator in the moment when the Floods find themselves confounded by the mysterious sign they see but cannot comprehend. Morrison, in effect, interrogates a scene from Milton's epic with revisionist uppityness and aesthetic waywardness. In particular, she echoes the expansive view Adam and Eve see as the fallen couple head beyond the gates of Eden with "the world . . . all before them . . . /and Providence their guide".[12] This mosaic of allusions ultimately amounts to showcasing Morrison's various spiritual interrogations of Milton's Eve on womanist grounds of contention. Throughout *Paradise*, her clever poetic manipulations of Milton's epic re-creates and re-purposes the first mother of the canonical poem by amplifying her heroic status in the personages of five bodacious women, who, by novel's end, are sublimated to ministerial offices of messianic divas.

As such, Morrison poetically facilitates a reimagining of Paradise through a womanist interrogation of Milton's Eve that the novelist's Miltonic foreword helps clarify. Marking the grounds of contention

[11] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 12.641–43.
[12] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 12.646–47.

with her uppity reception of Milton, his epic, and women's limited role within the poem, gives readers something Miltonic to look forward to beyond the pages of the 2014 foreword. Now, when a new dispensation of readers looks beyond the title page of Morrison's novel and reads more creatively into each of its nine chapters, they may bear spiritual witness to Milton's (in)visible influential presence more clearly than ever has been cited in previous literary criticism. As her Miltonic foreword makes evident, Morrison's 1997 novel reimagines Paradise by inviting audiences to embody its conceptual image in the here and now. Should readers embody this state of Paradise within, her novel suggests, they can stand amid a great cloud of spiritual witnesses, who, without shame, preach gospels of black revolt that have been anointed by womanist revisions. Such revisionist interrogations give us all something Miltonic to look forward to whether in the shared present, beyond the times of our immediately foreseeable future, or long afterwards.

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Article

Spiritual Eroticism and Real Good Loving in Tina McElroy Ansa's *The Hand I Fan With*

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Abstract: By situating herself in the historical dialogue about Christianity, women, and sexuality, the author examines what many may consider an oxymoron—spiritual eroticism. The essay provides a definition of spiritual eroticism, one which takes it beyond intense sexual encounters but instead grounds the idea in the story of Oshun, the African deity of beauty, sensuality, and fertility. Spiritual eroticism is explored in Tina McElroy Ansa's *The Hand I Fan With*.

Keywords: spirituality; Oshun; eroticism; God; Oya; ghost; spirits; honey; storms; caul

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I was baptized in a rural Baptist church and came of age in a Pentecostal church, both of which informed my notions of a woman's place and the cost of embracing sexual pleasure. The Bible gave me the Virgin Mary and Jezebel—the saint and the whore. It also gave me a secondary position in the hierarchy. Thus, I learned to silence my voice, reject the sustaining friendship of women who "don't do nothing but stir up trouble", untrustworthy and unvalued. I was cautioned to keep my dress down and legs closed and to judge women who did not. I heard the whispers of grown women about some little girl who was "fast" and too womanish for her own good. I was not to laugh loud or be rambunctious. Even as a flat-chested little girl, I could not go shirtless like my younger brother whose chest mine resembled or sit wide-legged straddling the chair like him.

Although I was taught the value of being the wife, the Biblical creation story taught me that I am man's side piece, having come from his rib. Then I learned about Lilith, the first woman created by God. Her subsequent demonization and omission from Bible Study taught me she was not to be admired or emulated. This Biblical anctioning of the pious and virtuous woman informed the standard bearing Cult of True Womanhood: "The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power" (Welter 1966).

Consequently, many Black women have internalized the shame of sex and upheld the mantle of chasteness, imposing it like the mother in Jamaica Kincaid's Girl who teaches her daughter to be a "good" woman and prophesies that she will become "the slut [she] is so bent on becoming" (Kincaid 1978). Having internalized the notion of true womanhood, even enslaved Harriet Jacobs, in her powerful telling of her life story in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), beseeches her reading audience to not judge her harshly: "For years, my master had done his utmost to pollute my mind with foul images, and to destroy the pure principles inculcated by grandmother ... But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood .... I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong from me" (Jacobs 2014, p. 223). Her grandmother, having embraced this standard, rejects her: "O Linda! Has it come to this? I had rather see you dead that as you are now .... Go away ... and never come to my

house again" (p. 235). Likewise, the women who reject this standard are shunned by their community, disowned in their disgrace. The Color Purple's Shug Avery completely embraces her sexuality and enjoyment of love, and life, and sex and is consequently disowned her religious family. Etta Mae Johnson in Gloria Naylor's Women of Brewster Place, like Shug Avery, embraces the joie de vivre and lives life fully while looking for love. She thinks she has found it in the arms of a minister who enjoys her flesh but not her hand. Fortunately, neither Shug Avery nor Etta Mae Johnson allowed the world to impose its chastity belt on their woman selves or their love for life and laughter. Seeing myself in these characters, I felt like maybe I, too, could laugh loud, be rambunctious, and glory in my womanhood.

Then Ntozake Shange's Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo, a novel dedicated to the "*all women in the struggle*", told me that "where there is woman, there is magic" (Shange 1982, p. 1), and I exhaled at the literary acknowledgement of my magical self. I witnessed the celebration of Indigo's first menses, described as a "spreading out of her in a large scarlet pool at her feet" (p. 18). Sister Mary Louise praises this moment: "Indigo the Lord's called you to be woman. ... Indigo fell down on her knees like Sister Mary had. And listened and swayed in her growing scarlet ... ." (p. 18). Ritualizing Indigo's rite of passage, Sister Mary Louise "gently took off Indigo's clothes, dropped them in a pail of cold water. She bathed Indigo in a hot tub filled with rose petals: white, red, and yellow floating around a new woman" (p. 19). Wearing a garland of flowers, Indigo is instructed to go in the backyard: "there in the garden, among God's other beauties, you should spend these first hours. ... Take your blessing and let your blood flow among the roses. Squat like you will when you give birth. Smile like you will when God chooses to give you a woman's pleasure. Go now, like I say. Be not afraid of your nakedness" (p. 19).

Having been taught that a woman's menstrual cycle was God's curse that rendered us "unclean", I discovered and embraced my woman self as I watched, along with Cypress, "Azure Bosom dance a female dance. A gender dance. A dance of ovaries and cervix uncovered and swelling, menses falling like waterfalls in a gold forest. A dance of women discovering themselves in the universe. She. Her. Hers. Us" (p. 141). Shange told us that we needed a "god who bleeds/spreads her lunar vulva and showers us in shades of scarlet/thick and warm like the breath of her/ ... /we need a god who bleeds now/whose wounds are not the end of anything" (Shange 1983, p. 15), a god in our image. This god we meet in her choreopoem For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf (Shange 1997). Making Her acquaintance, I laughed, and I danced, feeling like the colored girls as I "found god in myself, and I loved her fiercely!" (p. 64), a god who bleeds and gives life.

Grounded in African spirituality, Shange in Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo takes us to an African spiritual Bembee where we are introduced to African deities Shango, Oshun, Oya, and Elegua, gods we would have known had "if the white folks hadn't stolen our gods. Made our gods foreign to us" (p. 214). There on the Meeting House on the table was

> "Shango's birthday present, a mountain of fresh, unbruised red apples, was in place. An arc of half-smoke cigars smoldered on the ground, a warning or an offering for devotees. In red and white, with elekes or no, the followers added their personal gifts for the deity of the Ax: vials of home-made whiskey, bananas, knives, long-handled axes, brightly covered scarves, shirts, headwraps. Shango was the warrior who protected the New World from marauders, white folks, recidivists. Sassafrass so wanted to be a priestess of Oshun, ... To heal, to bring love and beauty wherever she went.
>
> Before she went to the Bembee, Sassafrass anointed herself with florida water: a dab on the forehead, under each arm, her navel, her pubic hair, behind each knee, under both archesof her feet. She left glasses full of honey and water in every corner of her cabin. She left bluing by the front door, ammonia at the rear, that no evil should enter her house in her absence. She carried wild flowers with her to offer to Oshun, her Mother, in the event that Oshun, as was her nature, grew jealous during Shango's festivities." (p. 215)

If Girl, Shug Avery, and Etta Mae were viewed by their mothers and the community through an African-centered lens, they, like Indigo, Cypress, and Sassafrass, would have been celebrated as daughters of Oshun, African deity of beauty, sensuality, mirrored self-reflection who loves life and laughter, dance and perfume, jewelry and flowers, love, and intimacy. Oshun epitomizes black girl magic, beauty, and power. Significantly, Oshun, unlike Eve, plays a central role in African cosmology, playing a significant role in the creation of the world. Supreme Being Oludumare sent the secondary divinities to make earth habitable. Tasked with ensuring continuity and balance, Oshun was the only female deity sent. Because she was not a male, the male deities dismissed her work. Angered by this, Oshun employed her power and disrupted their work. Puzzled, the male deities consulted Ifa (the spiritual system of divination) and learned that it was because of their exclusion of Oshun that their plans went awry. They had to make offerings to appease Oshun, perhaps originating the idea of flowers and candy as expressions of love and apology.

Oshun is a powerful female deity, whose energy is essential for balance and maintenance of world order. It was Oshun's sweet honey that brought the warrior deity Ogun, god of iron and steel who clears the path, from the forest where he retreated, remorseful for mistakenly killing his followers. His absence created an imbalance in the world. Performing a sensuous dance with honey, Oshun drew Ogun to her from the forest into the clearing. It was also Oshun who captured and defeated the Town of Women when the male deities—Sango, Ogun, Babaluwaye, Egun-Egun—failed as well as the other female deities—Oya and Yemonya. Like Ogun, the women's exclusion of men from their town created an imbalance. It was with her cunning and sweet music that she played on a broken calabash that caused the women to drop their weapons and begin to sing and dance with Oshun and her music (Montgomery 2008, pp. 31–32).

Oshun is indeed "a force of harmony we see as beauty, feel as love, and experience as love" (Ifa Bite 2019). While Oshun is most often viewed as the deity of sensuality, femininity, and fertility, she is also the leader of the Aje (the Mothers), the primordial principle symbolized by the colors red, black, and white, with each color representing the scope of their power and womanhood: Red—passion, fire, capacity for anger and intensity; Black—the earth, mystery, one can never fully know them; White—calm, repelling negative energy. Like a grandmother, they are loving and nurturing but also stern and no nonsense. As the leader of the Aje, Oshun epitomizes each of these characteristics. She hates restriction and can be fickle, vengeful, and jealous. Sometimes referred to as Mami Wata, the water divinities of Africa and its diaspora, Oshun's residence is in the water—rivers, creeks, streams, oceans. With balance a central tenet of Oshun, there is an expectation of reciprocity with Oshun, because one cannot receive without also giving. This expectation, unfortunately, has caused some to mischaracterize Oshun as a prostitute, a term that is both offensive and problematic. It reflects a patriarchal view of women grounded in Eurocentrism. For example, Edwards and Mason (1985) writes in his seminal text Black Gods: Orisha Studies in the New World, "Oshun gives psychological and physical pleasures to the senses and mental pleasure and she is a prostitute or harlot who brings physical pleasure...She is also a prostitute in the sense that she does and gives favors for sex" (p. 76). Also, by only equating Oshun with sex because of a limited view of women, many have misunderstood and misrepresented Oshun. As deity of love, maternity, and marriage, Oshun is also storied to have become a prostitute in order to support her children. There is, however, no evidence of this in any of the Odu—sacred stories, verses, and scriptures that provide wisdom and moral guidance—about Oshun.

Echoing an African proverb, "Oshun is my Oludumare", the beginning and the end, Oshun is too vast for us to comprehend, and thus, difficult to capture or depict all aspects of her. She is, for me, both fire and water, honey and kola, restraint and freedom, nature and nurture, the sweet and the bitter, laughter and tears. However, because my paper is about spiritual eroticism, my focus is primarily on Oshun as deity of sensuality.

Playing a significant role in African cosmology, Oshun as deity of beauty and sensuality spiritualizes lovemaking. Thus, the sexual exchange between two people is a spiritual exchange, a coming together of mind, body, spirit, and soul, an erotic experience. The erotic, unfortunately, has been used against women by men, which, consequently, has caused women to turn "away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information" (Lorde 1981) and confusing it with the diametrically opposed pornography: "But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling" (p. 54). While most equate eroticism with sex, it is, according to Audre Lorde, much more than that. She defines the erotic as "the assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and the use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives" (p. 54). Eroticism is a spiritual connection between two people and informs the joy experienced through the sharing of one's self, on all levels, whether "physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual" (p. 56). Spiritual eroticism, an oxymoron for many, is the conscious opening of one's self to the natural sensuality of a spiritual, intimate, and orgasmic coming together of two people who are connected through mutual desire, respect, and passion that opens each up to joyous freedom, a willing vulnerability, and an ecstatic release. In order to experience this, "we must first reclaim our innocent joy in sensory experience, and get over the idea that physical desires are not spiritual, and that sex is sinful or shameful, but this is just the beginning of accessing the spiritual potential of the erotic" (Anapol 2019).

Writing a novel that epitomizes spiritual eroticism, Tina McElroy Ansa celebrates love, spirituality, eroticism, Oya, and Oshun in her book *The Hand I Fan With*, which tells the story Lena McPherson whose introduction to her spiritual mate Herman, a 100-year-old ghost, is a gentle, orgasmic breeze on her neck. Conjured up by Lena's anthropologist best friend Sister and Lena, Herman loves Lena to life and connects Lena to her innate spiritual power and (re)introduces her to the beauty and a deepened appreciation for her estate. Under Herman's loving tutelage, Lena learns to read nature and herself. He advises her "to start payin' 'tention to everything you think is important enough t' give ya some peace or wisdom or some kinda new tack on the world that me be what you s'posed to see" (p. 347). Consequently, Lena becomes more tuned to her caul's powers. She divests herself of her self-imposed responsibilities, leaving them in the capable hands of her employees. More importantly, as Lena more easily accesses her spirit self, she and Herman have mind-blowing, earth-moving, souls coming together, orgasmic lovemaking, in the house, on the floor, in the stables, by the river, on the ground, on the table, and in the bed. Ghost Herman transforms and transports himself so that he can better learn and love Lena.

Born with a caul, Lena McPherson is successful, wealthy, the baby of the family, and the last living member of the McPherson family. Having everything, she is the "hand" everyone fans with, writing checks, bestowing spiritual blessings—"Lena could not remember when she had first started blessing people's houses, imparting brief benediction of healing or praise or tears on the inhabitants" (p. 14), serving as godmother of many children and the executrix of multiple estates in Mulberry, and taking care of the homeless girls and boys girls, whom she calls her "children". Lena's blessings turned "out to be blessings for everyone. Lena was like that, had always been. The blessings just flowed out from her. She was a blessing to her family, to her friends, and to Mulberry" (p. 15).

As the hand that everybody fans with, Lena spends much of her time and money giving and doing for others. Her gifts and generosity are not fully reciprocated. Recognizing they have little to give to the woman who has everything, the community gives what it can—prayers, cooked dinners delivered to her home in Tupperware, and love. She believes she lives a full and fulfilling life. As the baby of the family, Lena has always had the love of her family and the community. For that blessing, Lena, who has so much, feels compelled to do for others and considers it a blessing to do without any expectation of reciprocity. Having given herself to the community, Lena has nothing left for herself. She has everything but no time to enjoy any of it. She is operating on empty. Consequently, without reciprocity, Lena lives a life of imbalance. Moreover, there is no one to satisfy her yearning for intimacy

and love. Without that love, Lena is not fully alive or living, and thus she is ripe for Oshun's gift of love and balance.

In spite of seeming to have everything, what Lena does not have but wants is a man. Lena's caul has been both a blessing and a curse. Because her modern, new mother Nellie did not perform the necessary rituals to blind her to evil spirits and ghosts, Lena is tormented throughout her childhood and young adult life. Ostracized by her friends, she sees ghosts, spirits use her voice to speak unexpectedly, and she grows up thinking she is crazy: "[Lena] had finally come to the conclusion that she was crazy, truly crazy. [. . .] She just prayed that she could hold on and not do anything too bizarre—not walk the streets talking and arguing [. . .]—until she finished college, got a job, and could pay for some professional help" (Ansa 1989, p. 24). She has, however, been sent several spirit guides to protect and guide her—Rachel, the ghost of an enslaved woman who commits suicide by drowning who teaches Lena she belongs "anywhere she wants to be", Mamie, the only hairdresser who could tame Lena's long, thick, and abundant hair without making her cry and teaches her the art of asking questions, Sarah, "lil' Rough and Ready", her poor childhood friend from across the street who not only introduces her to sex but also gives Lena a glimpse into poverty and the impoverished lives of others, and finally her deceased Grandmother Lizzie's spirit that returns to tell of her destroyed caul and provide comfort to Lena by reminding her that she was not crazy and has never been alone; she encourages her seek out Nurse Bloom, the nurse who helped deliver her and made the caul tea and preserved her caul. Lena, even as child, was able to "put magic on just about anything: a radio, the television, a stuck door [. . .]. Her magic was sometimes only temporary, but it nearly always worked for a time" (p. 53).

At 45, Lena McPherson has mastered her ghosts—"Over the years, she had taught herself to ignore the signs of ghosts as well as the apparitions. She had just made herself go headlong on into any situation, knowing that she would be safe" (p. 47)—and managed to convince herself she is happy and leading a fulfilled life doing for everyone, except herself. She has all of the trappings of wealth but does not have time to enjoy it all. As the hand that everyone fans with, Lena is not allowed to complain or be sad: "Lena, what you got to be all frowned up about? 'they'd want to know. 'Shoot, if I had *yo'* hand, I'd throw mine in!" (p. 15) While she has had many dates, none developed into relationships: "Lena's curse was being able to gaze into another's soul" (p. 46). Just as she puckers her lips to kiss, her caul-informed eyes sees into her date's past, seldom a pretty picture: "It was only when they touched each other intimately or kissed deeply that the man's thoughts and past came creeping out for Lena to hear and see right there" (p. 108). The last man she attempted to seduce with a picnic in her clean, heated stables was offended. Consequently, Sister, not wanting to leave Lena alone and lonely while she went on a year-long sabbatical in Africa, convinces Lena to perform a conjure ritual for a man—"a wonderful man, a sexy man, a wise man, a generous-spirited man, a smart man, a funny man, a loyal man, *her* man" (p. 105). However, the arrival of her conjured-up Herman, first as a seductive breeze on her neck, an earthy man smell in The Place, her inherited bar and grill, then as a vapor, and finally a brush between her thighs, expands Lena's spiritual horizons and opens her heart to love and her legs and mouth to loving. Spirit and flesh, Lena and Herman, who is perfect for her because he is HerMan, reach erotic heights through their profound spiritual connection.

The novel opens with manifestations of Oshun and Oya, deity of change and transition, storms and tornadoes, and guardian to the cemetery. Her presence is appropriate in a novel about Lena's change and growth as well as a ghost who traverses two worlds—the living and the dead. We witness Oya at work when the Ocawatchee River floods; that "miraculous time when the waters of the Ocawatchee River—usually, perennially, historically, almost always a red muddy, sometimes nearly ocher color, ran as cool as the dreams of a drought-stricken people, as clear as a melting glacier . . . " (p. 1). Afterwards, the land was healed and blessed: "Flora and fauna. Not only a record number of Mulberry babies were being created and born, but flowers were growing and pollinating with strange hybrids, forming new creations; long-dead perennials were coming back to life: Early Girl tomato plants grown in the much that under floodwaters bore so much fruit the plants sagged to the ground in home gardens all over town" (p. 2). The flood also allows a glimpse of Lena's unrealized power to disrupt and create.

She caused the river to flood when in anger she spit into the river. It was only the Ocawatchhee's "new reborn waters [that] ... were miraculous waters, healing waters, good for anything that ailed you" (p. 4).

Appropriately, it is through Oya's breeze that Herman introduces himself and the experience reflects Oshun in its eroticism: "But it seemed that the very thought of the warm breathy breeze evoked the wind itself ... And the touch—soft and seductive—Lena flinched sharply, drew her shoulders up by her ears and sucked in her breath suddenly at what felt like the fronts of a feather ... And she let out a small 'Ooo' with her mouth hanging open. She felt her legs fall apart at the knees below her new short satin skirt. Sinking into an orgasmic sensation, she closed her eyes, took both her hands off the steering wheel and began to slip down the back of her sweater on either side of her neck to touch the feather-caressed spot" (p. 10).

Oshun and Oya facilitate another intimate encounter between Herman and Lena as Lena dances by herself in The Place: "As she continued to dance herself around the uncluttered spot in the middle of the bar, she felt almost caught up in a whirlwind. As she continued to spin, she felt herself growing dizzy. Not from the twirling of her lone slow dance, but from the musky scent in the air" (pp. 41–42). When Herman finally makes his appearance—he appears first in Lena's pool named Rachel's Waters, and the watery domain of Oshun—he takes flesh and form, and introduces himself: "I'm Herman. I'm here 'cause you called me up ... I'm a spirit, Lena. Been one fo' most a hundred years. But you called me here and made me real. You did that. And here I am" (p. 155). His ethereal to physical transformation Lena likens to the creation, thinking there should be "Creation music" (p. 155), and evidencing both the power of Lena's spoken word and Oya's presence, "right away, the wind outside began rustling the trees and the heavy metal wind chimes hanging ... " (p. 155). He reminds her of the ritual but noted that the power was not in the ritual; that "just to show you *willin'*. Willin' to the ceremony. It show you believe. But yo' 'ceremony' didn't call me up, Lena. *You* called me up. It was you called me up...*You* invited me in. That's all it took. An invitation from you" (p. 157). More significantly, Herman reminds her of her spiritual specialness and Nellie's devastating action: "Shoot, spirits been watchin' you since ya been born. ... And yo' birth ... it was almost like it shook the whole afterlife world ... and when yo' mama poured out that caul tea ... and yo' protection from mean spirits along wid it. There was noise and disturbance in my world like I had never heard when that happen. Lena, it was like all heaven and hell had been let loose. Oh, the howls and screams and shrieks and yells and lamentations that went up that day" (p. 158). Spending the morning in seeming time-suspended conversation, Lena feels profoundly connected to Herman, like she was "talking to with a trusted friend, not a strange ghost" (p. 162), and she realizes Herman was the "breeze", the "face in the mirror", and the "smell at The Place" (p. 162).

Smelling like "dark rich crumbly earth itself outside her door. He smelled like the dirt she ate as a child" (p. 193), Herman grounds Lena. As they dance, his breath is hypnotic for Lena: "Each time she felt him breathing on her—her neck, her face, her hair—she fell more deeply and more deeply under his spell" (p. 193). Lena's body responds to the sensuous sensations of Herman's body next to hers: "As they rubbed their bodies against each other, Lena felt her clitoris quiver. And she let out a little soft 'uhh' from the pit of her soul" (p. 194). Souls touched, they experience their first orgasm together, "a core-shaking exquisite orgasm, with Herman inside of her and around her and right beside her coming, too, and watching her at the same time" (p. 195). Echoing Oshun who loves honey, Herman calls Lena's vagina her "honey pot" (p. 196). A spirit, Herman transforms himself, touching Lena's mind, body, and soul: "One minute, he was hard and real as the granite of Stone Mountain. She could feel him inside her hard, the veins in his dick throbbing against the walls of her vagina. The next, he was mist, smoke, vapor barely grazing down her breasts, stroking between her legs, seesawing between the folds of her vagina, easing up her back. Then, he would become a man again" (p. 197). Herman's love is eroticism epitomized as he alters his body to please Lena, and she embraces his strange metamorphoses unafraid, "no matter how bizarre and fantastic they might have seemed" (p. 198), a significant fearless embrace since her previous ghosts had appeared in "terrifying form: wolves, cats, and wild dogs;

headless, footless bodies; decaying bodies with heads facing one way, torsos the other; babies who turned to ghoul" (p. 245). As Spirit's gift of giving and loving, Herman goes "deeper and deeper inside her, touching spots and opening doors to room after room that Lena had never opened to opened to anyone. Herman roused emotions she truly had not felt before" (p. 199). Giving herself to Herman, she proclaims, "I decided I *am* your woman" (p. 199). Their coming together is cosmic and profoundly spiritual: "Lena seemed to feel a change in her very blood chemistry. . . . She began to perceive sparks of life all around her. The universe she was sinking into had a wide and complex life. She felt planets spinning by her in their orbits. She saw galaxies form next to her hips. Shooting stars and comets whizzed by her from her vagina toward the top of her head, leaving tails of gold and red down her throat and stars in her eyes" (p. 203). When they make love, which Herman calls "merged" (p. 229), their souls connect. Their orgasms were cosmic: "In the grip of a sweet, soul-rattling orgasm, their eyes met, and they smiled at each other. Then, they fell back to the earth" (p. 324). This spiritual connection allows them to travel inside each other's mind and thoughts "in a way he was never able to achieve when they were just talking or holding hands. But the extraordinary thing was that Lena could do the same with Herman. She, too, entered his ghost's mind when he drifted into her subconscious" (p. 229), and so every gesture is "so intimate, meant just for them" (p. 229). While she sleeps, Herman rides through her dreams, and they would awaken in the middle of the night "to the music of her vagina just humming away" (p. 220). Herman becomes the water in Lena's bath, the lotion she rubs on her body, and realizing that she is slathering Herman all over her body, she drops the lotion bottle in ecstasy. She takes him to heaven and he tells her "you got the keys to kingdom, baby" (p. 251).

Their intense spiritual connection makes magic happen all around them: "If it started to rain while they were out walking down by the river, there would seem to be a bubble around them . . . One minute it was dry and breezy inside the bubble. The next minute it stopped raining outside and only rained inside the bubble" (p. 247). He literally makes the earth shake when Lena orgasm just to hear her say, "yeah, Herman, the earth *did move* for me" (p. 225). Herman's arrival made Lena's whole world shiver and shift. They were connected to one another from the first night they ate, danced, and loved together. This deep connection is manifested in their lovemaking. Not only does Herman make the earth shake, he makes her "pussy *sing*" (p. 247), an expression young Lena heard the women say at The Place. And while she thought she had a clue about what it meant, her body examples it: "At first, she thought it was Herman down there between her legs singing to himself in exhilaration and ecstasy when he kissed and sucked and tickled and licked . . . Then she realized it wasn't Herman's voice she heard . . . Her pussy let out such a beautiful, lilting happy song with no real words" (p. 218). It sang when she was out in public—the grocery store, a meeting, the elevator, and she resigned herself to being embarrassed by the "siren's song, even during Mass when her stuff sang along with the choir" (p. 219).

However, Lena's growth is not just sexual. Herman's loving tutelage caresses Lena's mind, body, and soul, heightening and informing her spiritual growth. Herman increases her awareness of and knowledge about the earth and the sky. He identifies the stars in the sky, "the Drankin' Gourd. There's the Serpent. OOoooo. Is that the Crab? There's the Virgin" (p. 194), advising her to "cherish this piece a' earth we been given" (p. 258). He teaches her how to survive by educating her on the various plants, birds, non-poisonous mushrooms, berries, fruit, edible plants, and vegetables that grow in the wild on her 100 acres of land: "Lena, tie this cotton kerchief 'round yo' mouth when we out walking in the woods . . . so yo' breath don't draw those' squitas and bitin' flies" (p. 260). He shares with her a sweet discovery, appropriately, a beehive, and he gifts her thick dark honey dripping from two fingers that she gladly took in her mouth, relishing the honeyed sweetness, sweet "as cartoon honey", the intensity of which "nearly blew the top of her head off when she smacked her lips" (p. 260). Essentially, Herman helps Lena truly claim her land: "But Herman showed her she really had not really *claimed* it. She could not do that until she *knew* the land and the spirit under it" (p. 345). They wash their hair in hauled in buckets of Cleer Flo' water from the streams popping up on her property, a ritual they revel in.

By profoundly connecting Lena to her land, the earth, nature, and her inner spirit, Herman helps her claim her soul. Herman's presence and love activates the childhood power of her caul: "The random voices she heard as a child were now the inner voices that guided her. Now, she put the magic on declining plants and revived them. She began to be able to look at strangers and familiars alike and sometimes read their thoughts and intentions" (p. 354). Becoming increasingly grounded, Lena smells like the earth, like the dirt: "Lena knew she was being drawn closer and closer to the earth, and she knew it was somehow Herman's doing. The further she pulled herself away from the things of the world—her possessions, her businesses, her shoes, her dependents, her visits, even her gifts and acts of kindness—the nearer she drew to the peaceful, serene spirit of the world by itself" (p. 325).

With Herman, Lena's spirituality intensifies as she learns to see God in nature, the woods, the river, not just in church. She has a natural religious fervor that informs her worship and her "Healing and Miracle Ministry" (p. 263). She erects shrines for Rachel, Oshun, Yemonya, and Mary, "her mother, grandmama, Mother Hale, Mother Theresa, and all mothers" (p. 270) throughout her property in celebration of the feminine energy. A practicing Catholic, she performs Mass outdoors, and the "flowers and plants, the bees, birds and bugs all bobbed and danced and bowed in adoration at the Eucharist that Lena performed so sincerely and joyfully" (p. 266) and by midsummer after Herman's arrival, she stopped going to church regularly: "At one altar or another, she celebrated the Eucharist each morning. Alone or surrounded by the spirits of all the loved ones she had lost, she intoned her declaration of faith as she lifted the read and the wine" (p. 270), to which Herman affirms, "It's all communion, baby ... It's all good" (p. 326).

As Lena grows spiritually, she transforms physically and mentally. Before Herman's arrival, she was becoming thick around the waist; her doing for everyone left no time for much physical exercise. With the spiritual and physical merged into one, Lena's body becomes toned and tight as she rips and runs with Herman exploring her caves, the woods, racing horses, and betting "blow jobs and massages on who would win" coupled with the intense lovemaking: "For Lena, that activity covered everything she and Herman did or planned to do to give each other physical, that sometimes verged on spiritual, pleasure. Fucking, licking, and sucking, scratching, fondling, tickling, holding, biting. All of it meant lovemaking to her. And she had to credit her incredibly strengthened inner thigh muscles as much to riding Herman as to riding horses" (p. 352). Again, she realizes the blessing Herman is to her and for her.

Lena's journey into herself mapped by Herman's arrival retreats her from the community, and she ceases her 24-h availability and accessibility for the people of Mulberry. No longer having her hand to fan with, the townspeople become angry with her. Now completely tuned into her caul's power, Lena can hear their thoughts. Used to being "instantly loved" (p. 397), she is not prepared for the vitriol directed at her: "Lena was cut to the quick when she understood that the people of Mulberry were truly angry with her, talking about committing her, talking about her deserting them, talking about her betraying her family's name" (p. 397). Feeling betrayed by the townspeople's resentment when she overhears their negative thoughts and conversations about her, Lena lashes out: "Shit, I can't believe I've been such a fool. Everybody ain't happy for me. After all I've done for them, they don't really give a damn about me. Herman, they *mad* at me!!!" (p. 397). Gently chastising her, Herman puts her in her place: "You just holdin' up the weight of the world, huh ... ? Lena, baby, those people ain't in yo' hands. They in God's hands. And you ain't God" (p. 255). Although Herman reminds Lena she caused Cleer Flo', Lena's anger, again, is wreaking havoc on nature. Invoking the energy and power of Oya and Shango, the deity of truth, justice, retribution, and lightning, Lena creates a storm: "A storm had come up suddenly over the Ocawatchee and tall muddy red peaks were beginning to form on the surface as the wind whipped up foam. A lightning bolt struck a tree in Pleasant Hill, melding a baby doll, a brand-new Schwinn bicycle, and a red hairpin to its trunk" (p. 398).

As her Spirit guide, Herman helps abate the storm still raging in Lena by reminding her of human nature: "just people bein' human. You ain't in control, Lena...Doin' fo' people don't make 'em yo's" (p. 402), and he wraps himself around Lena in a "stream of warm loving mist" (p. 403). Evidencing her

spiritual growth and control of her power, Lena forgives folks and herself. In her final release, Lena screams her feelings: “Fuuuuccckkk you” (p. 403) without cussing up a storm. Having forgiven the townspeople, Lena blesses them with thoughtful and loving gifts of forgiveness, which they received with forgiveness. This time she gives because she genuinely wants to, not because she feels obligated to do so. Her final gift is her most generous one—her family home: “the house on Forest Avenue would make the perfect shelter for my children” (p. 408), designed and renovated to meet their needs.

Having divested herself of most of her worldly and unneeded goods, Lena prepares to love Herman for the rest of their lives. Like her previous Spirit Guides sent to guide and protect Lena for a season, Herman came for only a year. His presence saves Lena’s life as she experiences love and loving, joy and happiness, peace and spirituality, lessons and learning. He’s been watching and protecting her whole life, and he tells her, “I had a duty when I come here, Lena, to he’p you along a little bit. Baby, yo’ unhappiness was causin’ such havoc in the otherworld . . . Then, yo’ broken heart start causin’ disturbance in this world, too...Yo’ anger callin’ up storms. Yo’ loneliness extendin’ over the county. Yo’ spittin’ causin’ Cleer Flo’. Like you som’um from the Old Tes’ament, Lena” (p. 450). As he arrived, vapor to flesh, Herman leaves, flesh to vapor, with all of his clothes, even the newly purchased ones vaporize along with him: “Then, right before her eyes, Herman’s clothes began to disappear, dissolving just the way Herman did...They all disappeared” (pp. 437–38). Oya’s breeze announces his arrival; Her storm follows his leaving. While Lena’s anger at the townspeople impacted nature, her devastation at Herman’s departure causes significant destruction and flooding: “Lena cried and carried on for most of the evening, pacing around her house, dark from the storm that was raging like a crazy person outside . . . The fury of the storm raged outside . . . ” (Ansa 1996, pp. 440–41). Lena is oblivious to the havoc she is causing even as she recognizes the storm’s power: “The storm was striding the earth with a vengeance. Ahead, Lena could see the lightning striking the surface of the Ocawatchee River, sending up sparks and electricity into the stormy night air. Thunder cracked all around her” (p. 445).

To assuage Lena’s pain and help guide her to healing, the spirits of Lena’s parents, grandparents, brothers, first-grade teacher Mrs. Hartwick, Dr. Williams, and Nurse Bloom visit her. They bear witness to Lena’s delivering Keba’s foal, a feat she did not think herself capable. Herman whispers instructions and encouraging words: “Then, like a breeze, Herman was right there at her shoulder . . . ’Take it easy, Lena, baby, take it easy’, his voice whispered in her ear. Then, ‘Shoot, Lena, you can do *this*. Now, you gon’ hafta get her started, but don’t you worry, ‘cause then, Keba gon’ take over and yo’ be almost finished’” (pp. 447–48). The ancestral spirits presence celebrates Lena’s acknowledged and embraced powers. A smiling Nurse Bloom tells Lena, “I was there when you were born, Lena, and I’m right here now in case you need me. Kinda feels the same way in here it felt in your delivery room. Things are alive out here at your place” (p. 449). Like Nurse Bloom assisted with her birth and Herman in her spiritual birth and initiation, Lena assists the birth of Keba’s foal. She marvels at this birth but more significantly at her own growth and transformation: “It surprised her just how comfortable she was with all these ghosts appearing and disappearing around her. Some were family. Many were friends. A couple she did not recognize right off, but she was not a bit afraid of or confused by any of them. They all seemed to have a place. And she did, too” (p. 454). After reminding Lena that “I am much in love wid you. I’m still yo’ man”, (p. 455), Herman vanishes. Other spirits visit her, including Mamie who reminds her that Herman’s presence was a gift. Rachel’s ghost smiles and waves, and Lena “could smell the deep, salty ocean scent on her” as she returns to the watery home. Nellie, now on the other side, understands the devastation her dismissal of ritual wrought in Lena’s life, and she apologizes: “And, baby, I didn’t know what I was doing when I poured out your caul water and burned your caul. I just didn’t know. But Mama always loved you” (p. 454). Frank Petersen appears, telling her “Lena-Wena, you done good in there. But then, you been doing good for a while” (p. 454). And finally, Lena’s Grandma Lizzie dispenses her aged wisdom, reaffirming that she will be alright, just as she did on the night of her funeral: “But it’s going to be okay. It’s going to feel okay, too.

It just doesn't seem that way now. But how things *seem* don't mean nothing" (p. 454). She even admits she didn't have a clue while she was alive which allows Lena to accept her cluelessness, too.

After Herman's departure, Lena tries to be angry with him, for loving and then leaving her, for teaching her everything but how to live without him, "without him eating her food, without him eating her pussy, without him taking her hand as they walked through the woods" (p. 457). However, in spite of her missing Herman, Lena can not be angry and knows it is not right being miserable. Still connected to her Herman, Lena hears his voice reminding her "ya gotta do the work you called to, Lena. But you ain't gotta be miserable" (p. 456). Herman was Lena's gift from the Spirit world, a gift that continues to give even in his absence. He speaks to her throughout the day, asking and answering questions, teaching and sharing stories. He was there for her "as mist, as breeze, as a felling, as sunshine, as a hunch, as the Ocawatchee River, but not as a man" (p. 457). Having learned her lessons, experienced love, spiritual eroticism, a deeper connection with her spiritual self, Lena sees her caul as the gift that it is. She is now more profoundly thankful for her life's gifts: "Herman and her ghostly family; her faith and the right she claimed to her own privacy and choices; (p. 455) Forest Avenue and her children; her garden and horses, and the freedom and time to enjoy them" (p. 458). Having surrendered and reveling in her *right now*, Lena is content and moving forward with her life and plans she and Herman made.

Tina McElroy Ansa deliberately wrote a sexy story for Black women that was full of hot, erotic lovemaking, with the sooty and sexy bedroom language to describe the eroticism, the passion, and the ecstasy of it all as a way of freeing us from the throes of Biblically-imposed, church-sanctioned narrow notions of women, to free us to love heartily, laugh loudly, scream in ecstasy, cuss while enjoying, saying what we want and how we want it, and not being ashamed. Appropriately, Ansa channeled the energies of Oshun to show us that lovemaking is indeed a spiritual act. By giving us Lena, Ansa shows us what spiritual eroticism looks like and how it feels. More importantly, she shows how liberating it is. Now balanced in her life and living, Lena's full embracing of her spirit self and her spiritual gifts heals her heart broken from the loss of her parents and her brothers, her blessed but tortuous childhood, the interrupted rituals, and absences in her life. In making her heart and spirit and pussy sing, Herman opens Lena up to the universe, and she opens her arms wide to receive Spirit's gifts. Like Lena, Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo, Shug Avery, and Etta Mae Johnson, we must know that where we are, there is magic. Where we are, there is beauty, and as daughters of Oshun, we are magical, beautiful, sensual, erotic, and spiritual.

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Article

Set Thine House in Order: Black Feminism and the Sermon as Sonic Art in *The Amen Corner*

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Abstract: In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois discusses the historical and cultural beginnings of the black preacher as "the most unique personality developed on American soil." He writes, "[the black preacher] found his functions as the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong ... Thus as bard, physician, judge, and priest within the narrow limits allowed by the slave system rose the Negro preacher." Far from being a monolith, the preacher figure embodies many complexities and variances on how the preached Word can be delivered. This begs the question, in what ways can we reimagine DuBois's black preacher figure in his words, "the most unique personality developed on American soil," as a black woman? What remains to be seen in scholarship of the mid-twentieth century is an articulation of the black *woman* preacher in African American literature. By reimagining and refiguring a response to DuBois's assertion above, how is the role of the black woman preacher and impact of her sermons portrayed in African American literature? Using the art of the sermon, the intersection of music, and James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* as a central text, this article examines the black woman preacher in character and African American women's spirituality in twentieth century literature. I argue that the way in which Margaret Alexander, as a black woman preacher in the text, creates sermonic spaces of healing and restoration (exegetically and eschatologically) for herself and others outside of the church becomes a new mode of social and cultural resistance. This article works to re-envision the black woman and reposition her in the center of religious discourse on our way to unearthing the modes of transfiguration black women preachers evoke in and out of the pulpit.

Keywords: the amen corner; james baldwin; black feminism; sermon; art; literature; music; black preacher; spirituality; religion

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> *"...who is more deserving of admiration than the black woman, she who has borne the rigors of slavery, the deprivations consequent on a pauperized race, and the indignities heaped upon a weak and defenseless people. Yet she has suffered all with fortitude, and stands ever ready to help in the onward march to freedom and power. Be not discouraged black women of the world, but push forward, regardless of the lack of appreciation shown you. A race must be saved, a country must be redeemed ... "*
>
> *-Amy Jacques Garvey*

> *"In the absence of vaulted ceilings, stained glass windows and other pleasures of the eyes the black preacher's spoken word becomes the vehicle through which insurgent and dispossessed listeners encounter the sublime."*
>
> *-Reverend Dr. Crystal J. Lucky*

According to W.E.B. DuBois's 1903 publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*, the "Negro church of to-day is the social centre of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character." (DuBois 2015) More explicitly, the black church is also defined as "the crucible in which the systematic faith affirmations and the principles of biblical interpretation have been

revealed." (Cannon 1985) The church in general, but the black church in particular, represents a place of refuge, solace, and activism. It is a place where strategies of resistance to oppression, subjugation, and denigration are talked about, formed, and implemented. The church—the black church—serves as an implement of healing and restoration from the "troubles of this world."

In 1903, DuBois's statement was a true, conceptual representation of the theological nexus of the black community. Men led their congregations in song and Scripture, while the women prayed and listened to the fiery admonition of the preacher who with crescendoing claps, a thunderous dance, hoarse voice, and perspiring palms raised to the heavens, called for freedom and reformation from hegemony and white supremacy for his community. One hundred sixteen years later, the makeup of the black church has changed. While some of DuBois's descriptions concerning the church remain the same, other illustrations *have* been altered. Prayers of hope, songs to sooth the soul, and shouts of praise are still extant, but the cry for freedom visions lingers. The resonant sound of the freedom visions cry ranges from a pianissimo snivel to a fortissimo wail. It rings in the ears of this nation like a cacophony, jarring the hearing and visibility of the black community that yearns to be pulled back into united harmony. How does the black woman preacher figure in African American literature release that marginalization, render her voice free and herself *visible* from invisibility?

In "Of the Faith of Our Fathers", W.E.B. DuBois describes the black preacher figure at length in The Souls of Black Folk as "the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil." (DuBois 1903) By reading this passage, one is led to assume the black preacher figure can only be envisioned as male. What remains to be seen in the canonical scholarship of the early twentieth century is an articulation of the black *woman* preacher. The impact of the black woman's *sermon* in African American literature is equally meaningful in scholarly conversation, for the "black sermon is the mother's milk of African American discourse." (Appiah and Gates 1999)

Preaching and the black church have been a fundamental part of black life since slavery was established in America during the 1600s. (Cannon 1995) Black preachers provided a realm for both leadership and authority, whose credibility went unquestioned within the space of the church. There, the performativity of the preacher could render the black body visible in a period where black people and everything that characterized them were deemed invisible. Black preaching and the black church have been essential to black life, serving as realms of leadership and authority that black people as slaves did not have externally but *could* themselves occupy within the space of the church.[1] Far from being a monolith, the preacher figure embodies many complexities and variances on how the preached Word can be delivered. This begs the question, can we imagine DuBois's black preacher figure in his words "the most unique personality on American soil" as a black woman? What sorts of nuances and varied possibilities do we need to place in the foreground in order to imagine black women as preacher figures and as the epitomes of moral authority? A question such as this requires that we re-envision the black woman and reposition her in the center of religious discourse on our way to unearthing the modes of transfiguration black women evoke via sermon and song, in and out of the pulpit.

In Cleophus J. LaRue's *The Heart of Black Preaching*, one has to match the connection between the sermon in black preaching and African American life. When the black preacher prepares to deliver Scripture and exegete it in such a way that the listener comprehends, there is an element in black preaching that cannot escape the discussion of black life in the sermon. In carefully exegeting a sermon, the preacher will both point to Scripture and the social occurrences of black life. In order to understand black preaching, one must understand the context in which that sermon is delivered. There is always

[1] Dr. Cannon writes in her exposition of black preaching and the church that the black community had a religious cultural that belonged to them. Amalgamating West African religious traditions and orthodox Christianity, "...black men and women developed an extensive religious life of their own. The Black church was the only social institution in which African Americans could exercise leadership and power, and the preacher and preaching were held in the highest esteem in the Black church community. "...The Black preacher served as the arbiter of intellectual/moral life and the principal interpreter of canonized sacred writings." (115)

intentionality behind the delivery of a particular sermon. LaRue writes, "While it is true that most black theologizing takes place in the pulpit, it is also true that a certain type of experiential brooding occurs in the embryonic stage of the sermon prior to the actual exegesis of the text. This deliberate, subliminal musing is an essential ingredient in the creation of the black sermon."[2] In his analysis of black preaching in general, LaRue lays the groundwork for understanding two very important points in black preaching: the preacher's incorporation and exegetical emphasis of black social reality in the sermon and its pertinence to Scripture and how the text of the sermon " ... impacts the sense in which God is believed to be present in and through scripture."[3]

This article investigates a black woman preacher protagonist in James Baldwin's first play, *The Amen Corner* (1954). Situating this work in an historical context, *The Amen Corner* can be understood as a Civil Rights Movement work written in the 1950s during the integration of public schools in the United States with *Brown v. Board of Education I and II*.[4] When the play is published, Baldwin gives readers a black woman preacher in literature at a time when the black male preacher becomes synonymous with the Civil Rights Movement.

Having contextualized this work, this article examines the exegetical and eschatological approaches to Scriptures employed by Margaret Alexander, black woman preacher protagonist in Baldwin's play. This article also considers Margaret's respective approach to preaching, the mechanics and expressivity of her sermonic delivery, and in the process, looks *beyond* the sacred agenda of her sermons in order to foreground the black feminist cultural and social work her sermons perform. In addition, the musicality of the sermonic text and its delivery are suggestive of what I am calling a *blues* sensibility. Hence, I use the term *black feminist blues consciousness* to demonstrate the affective power blues music exerts in this play. Augmenting the concept of *blues* sensibility, I recognize the necessity to go beyond the traditional blues idiom of blues and melancholic expressions to examine how joy, mobility, agency are found in the blue note. Building on what Dr. Otis Moss, III calls the *blue-note sensibility*, I examine the sermonic practices to be found in Baldwin's play.[5] Using *The Amen Corner* as a central text, this article analyzes the use of the sermon in Baldwin's play and the ways in which black feminism plays an efficacious part in the denouement of the text. Further, this essay evinces that irrespective of her location, Margaret Alexander remains a preacher and the impact of her sermons can be felt even when she leaves the church.

Throughout the play, Baldwin shows how Margaret, through her sermons, counters the hegemonic structures of racism, sexism, and classism that make women of color and particularly the voices of black women invisible within the church. As an authoritative presence in her own church, Baldwin evinces Margaret constantly fighting hegemony. The same mode of healing for black women that occurs inside of the church *should* be the very same mode that reaches black women outside of the church—a sermonic balm—healing speech that concerns the needs of the black woman. However, the point of contention arrives where the spaces that black women look to for healing and restoration in the church are not extant. In fact, the spaces within the church become the very same spaces they, in the end, have to constantly fight against to prove their worth. The manner in which black women create sermonic spaces of healing and restoration outside of the church becomes the *new* mode of resistance that we see with Margaret in *The Amen Corner*.

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[2] LaRue continues to assert the importance of the black social experience and its incorporation into the sermon of the black preacher. These two elements are inseparable. This observation is particularly important in this chapter when examining the sermonic space of the black woman. The context of each sermon is crucial in order to comprehend fully the meaning and impact of the black woman's ministerial delivery and just how her sermon impacts society outside of the church (13).

[3] LaRue (14).

[4] *Brown v. Board of Education I and II* convened in Topeka, Kansas in 1954 and 1955, respectively.

[5] Dr. Moss defines Blue Note sensibility in *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World: Finding Hope in an Age of Despair* as the amalgamation of the "shout and moan." Moss asserts that there must be a reclamation of this Blue Note sensibility in postmodernity in order for prophetic preaching to take place. (22).

The church for the black community represents a place of healing, a place of comfort and restoration, but what happens when that place that you know as home, does not feel like home anymore? What happens when that space of healing starts to become a space of regret and retraction? Margaret's feminist presence disrupts the church she leads, and Baldwin positions her in this time in this respective play to illustrate how gender is seen as a territory or terrain over which the Word or prophecy is fought.

Reverend Dr. Katie G. Cannon's chapter, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," refers to black women as "moral agents."[6] By marking the trajectory of the black woman's vocal emergence and need for her voice to counter degradation of the black community, Cannon provides an historical context of women's involvement in the church during slavery and of their informal interpretation of Scripture. These women weren't in the "pulpit," as formal titled preachers, but their work as "crusaders" of social advancement in the church spilled into their impact outside of the church, as well.[7] Black women were essentially invisible under the white supremacist lens. It is within the structure of the black church that black women found a space for vocalizing social justice.[8]

In Chanta M. Haywood's chapter, "The Act of Prophesying: Nineteenth-Century Black Women Preachers and Black Literary History," she defines prophesying as "the appropriation of a perceived mandate from God to spread His word in order to advance a conscious or unconscious political agenda." In her argument, Haywood makes clear that there are scholars such as Evelyn Higginbotham, Bettye Collier-Thomas and others who have made breakthroughs in their discoveries of the religious work of black women. In addition, Haywood emphasizes the necessity of recognizing and acknowledging in scholarship the element of the prophetic in African American literature. The notion of the prophetic is often bypassed by academicians, but it is the *prophetic* in literature that speaks to the path of the African American narrative structure: (Haywood 2003)

> "...we have paid little attention to how these women's prophesying influenced their literary strategies and approaches. Further, an analysis of prophesying as a religious rhetoric and literary trope could lead to new possibilities for interpreting African American literature, containing undercurrents of religion and religious rhetoric. Even more, little has been written that connects the idea of prophesying to the development of African American literary history in general and African American women's literary history in particular."[9]

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6 What makes Dr. Cannon's text so fundamental to this chapter is her exploration of black women as "moral agents" in the face of struggle between the worlds of white supremacy and male domination. She writes, "The feminist consciousness of Afro-American women cannot be understood and explained adequately apart from the historical context in which Black women have found themselves as moral agents. By tracking down the central and formative facts in the Black woman's social world, one can identify the determinant and determining structures of oppression that have shaped the context in which Black women discriminately and critically interpret Scripture, in order to apprehend the divine Word from the perspective of their own situation. Throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of White supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman's reality as a situation of struggle—a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one White, privileged, and oppressive, the other Black, exploited, and oppressed. Thus, an entangling of the Black religious heritage sheds light on the feminist consciousness that guides Black women in their ongoing struggle for survival." Katie G. Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness" (47).

7 In response to black feminist/womanist (to borrow Alice Walker's terminology) consciousness, Cannon makes clear the role of black women within the church as agents of social change and platforms of resistance. She writes, "The black woman as educator attended Sunday services at local churches, where she often spoke in order to cultivate interest in the Black community's overall welfare. Churchwomen were crusaders in the development of various social service improvement leagues and aid societies. They sponsored fund-raising fairs, concerts, and all forms of social entertainment in order to correct some of the inequities...in the Black community." (52).

8 "The Black woman began her life of freedom with no vote, no protection, and no equity of any sort. Black women, young and old, were basically on their own. The patterns of exploitation of the Black woman as laborer and breeder were only shaken by the Civil War; by no means were they destroyed. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Black women were severely restricted to the most unskilled, poorly paid, menial work. Virtually no Black woman held a job beyond that of domestic servant or field hand. Keeping house, farming, and bearing and rearing children continued to dominate all aspects of the Black woman's life. The systematic exclusion of Black females from other areas of employment served as confirmation for the continuation of the servile status of Black women." (Cannon 51).

9 Haywood, 17.

Additionally, this essay conveys the blues music essence in the preaching of the black woman in literature. Using Moss, Cone, Cannon, and other scholars' assertions of blues music, I examine the amalgamation between the blues sensibility in preaching and black feminism, pinpointing those minor tonal notes within the sermon that sing in and past oppression of the black woman's voice and body to create a space that marks the freedom of the black woman in mind, body, and spirit.

Born in Harlem in 1924 into a religious and strict childhood, James Baldwin was the eldest of nine children. Amiri Baraka fervently deemed him as "God's black revolutionary mouth." The language of the church, patterns of the Bible and the struggles found in Scripture are significant characteristics of Baldwin's writing. In Baldwin's 1986 interview with Terry Gross, he delineates his three-year position as boy preacher in the pulpit:

> And all of the elements which had driven me into the pulpit were still there—were still active. I was not less menaced. And in those three years in the pulpit—it's very difficult to describe them; I probably shouldn't try— . . . there was a kind of torment in it. But I learned an awful lot. And I lost my faith, well the faith I had had. But I learned something else. I learned something about myself, I think. And I learned something through dealing with those congregations. After all I was a boy preacher. And the people whose congregations I addressed were grown-ups. Boy preachers have a very special aura in the black community and the aura implies a certain responsibility and that responsibility above all to tell the truth. So as I began to be more and more tormented by my crumbling faith it began to be clearer and clearer to me that I had no right to stay in the pulpit. (Baldwin 1986)

In his play, the church is Baldwin's armor for writing and the performance of the people are his tools for composing the text. Almost every novel and play that Baldwin writes is contingent upon the church and its imperfections; those imperfections are evinced most clearly in *The Amen Corner*. He uses the sermon and the black woman preacher figure to reveal that the inconsistencies within the church are the same incongruities in the secular world. Baldwin reveals:

> I was armed, I knew, in attempting to write the play, by the fact that I was born in the church. I knew that out of the ritual of the church, historically-speaking, comes the act of the theatre, the communion which is the theatre. And I knew that what I wanted to do in the theatre was to recreate moments I remembered as a boy preacher, to involve the people, even against their will, to shake them up, and hopefully, to change them. I knew that an unknown black writer could not possibly hope to achieve this forum. (Baldwin 2013e)

Albert Murray's chapter, "The Blues as Music," gives a clear sense of what it means to have joy in the blues or to have joy in the morning. When the blues as music is generally defined, it is thought of as lugubrious, whining, complaining, downtrodden, dismal, dark compositions saturated with minor scale inflections; however, this spiritual aspect of joy coming during mourning or joy coming in the morning is the direct application of the blues to Baldwin's work and to Margaret sermons:

> But as preoccupied with human vulnerability as so many of its memorable lyrics have always been, and as suggestive of pain as some of its instrumentation sometimes seems to be, blues music can hardly be said to be synonymous with lamentation and commiseration. Not when the atmosphere of earthiness and the disposition to positive action it engenders are considered. And besides, sometimes the lyrics mock and signify even as they pretend to weep, and as all the finger snapping, foot tapping, and hip cocking indicate, the instrumentation may be far less concerned with agony than with ecstasy. (Murray 2017)

In *The Spirituals and the Blues*, Reverend Dr. James H. Cone defines the blues as music "about black life and the sheer earth and gut capacity to survive in an extreme situation of oppression." (Cone 1972a) Dating the blues back to the late nineteenth century, Cone further defines the blues as "the essential ingredients that define the essence of the black experience" (Cone 1972b)

> And to understand them, it is necessary to view the blues as a state of mind in relation to the Truth of the black experience": Like the spirituals, the blues affirm the somebodiness of black people, and they preserve the worth of black humanity through ritual and drama. The blues are a transformation of black life through the sheer power of song. They symbolize the solidarity, the attitudes, and the identity of the black community and thus create the emotional forms of reference for endurance and esthetic appreciation.[10]

The blues is a significant style of preaching in the black church. Blues music is an art form characteristic of despair, loneliness, torment, distress, pain, and sorrow, but out of this blues, out of this sorrow, and out of this pain, emerges a sound that transgresses despair and brings joy. It appears oxymoronic to have joy emanate from the blues, but this marks the narratives and the trajectory of a practice that exegetically reflects sermons of pain that turn into proclamations of joy and sermons of anguish that turn into declarations of triumph.[11] The sermons of Margaret mark specific sounds and particular notes that carry on the tradition of blues sung by black women. Black women sing their pain, anguish, sorrow, and grief. There was a particular joy that emanated from singing out the sting and pain of racism and misogyny. Not only was singing a way to ease out the heartache, but preaching proved a way to massage and assuage the burdens of the black woman.

Reverend Dr. Otis Moss, III defines black preaching as "...a unique cultural narrative and theological enterprise where African motifs meet diverse western influences of North America. A beautiful, bold, homiletical voice, poetry, prophetic witness, southern storytelling, lament, blues, and celebration are born out of this tradition." (Moss 2015) *Blue note sensibility* preaching is a homiletical sermonic style that amalgamates both, as Moss terms, the blues moan and the gospel shout. This amalgamation leads to a prophetic style of sermonic delivery that leaves a trace of hope in spaces of grievance.

Through the sermons of Margaret, I extend Moss's *blue note sensibility* term by providing a sense of the blue note as "other." Blues music with roots in African-American music, theory-wise, does not belong to the natural scale; it is a minor or flattened "out note." Blue notes are sounds that are dissonant and "don't belong."[12] In relation to blues sensibilities within the sermon of the black women preachers in Baldwin's works, their sermons and their lives, as witnessed in *The Amen Corner*, are filled with blue notes—modes of not belonging, marginalization, denigration by white supremacy and also by men in their families, churches, and communities.

Baldwin's 1954 play, *The Amen Corner*, reflects the traditions of the black church and how those traditions are displayed in the home. Set in a Harlem church in the 1950s, Baldwin writes the story of single mother, Sister Margaret Alexander, who is the prominent leader and preacher of her church, but she struggles with keeping things together at home. Her ex-husband, Luke, returns to her life and her son, David, desires a career as a jazz musician. David wants to follow in his estranged father's footsteps, but Margaret sees the annihilating path (in her eyes) her son is travelling and attempts to keep him in the church and out of the "world." Margaret's position of prominence within the church is

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[10] Cone, (117).

[11] In one of the pieces of writing in *The Cross of Redemption*, Baldwin explains in "The Uses of the Blues" the meaning of the blues as an art form in song. He makes clear in this context that a "toughness" exists in the blues that makes the experience of the artists singing it real: "I am engaged, then, in a discussion of craft or, to use a very dangerous word, art. And I want to suggest that the acceptance of this anguish one finds in the blues, and the expression of it, creates also, however odd this may sound, a kind of joy. Now joy is a true state, it is a reality; it has nothing to do with what most people have in mind when they talk of happiness, which is not a real state and does not really exist. Consider some of the things the blues are about. They're about work, love, death, floods, lynchings; in fact, a series of disasters which can be summed up under the arbitrary heading 'Facts of Life.'" (70–71)

[12] In a regular major tonic scale, all notes are in harmony with each other; however, when a "blue note" is inserted which is a flattened third of flattened fifth, it is considered as an "out note." The blues scale "...had its roots in Afro-American music with the slaves and really became used in Blues, receiving the name of 'Blues scale.' The term 'blue note' is generally translated into Portuguese as an 'out note,' due to the fact of this note not [belonging] to [the] natural scale." (simplifyingtheory.com/blues-scale-blue-note).

challenged by her son's rebellion at home. As a black woman whose position of authority is countered within the church and within her own domestic space, Baldwin allows us from a theatrical perspective to get a glimpse into Margaret's quest for the keys to the kingdom.[13] The kingdom represents love and immersing one's self in love is the ultimate endeavor here: "[Margaret's] triumph...is that she sees this finally and accepts it, and, although she has lost everything, also gains the keys to the kingdom. The kingdom is love, and love is selfless, although only the self can lead one there. She gains herself." (Baldwin 2013e) Although Margaret loses her church, her husband, and perhaps even her son in the play, she gains herself—she gains love of herself. This is what Baldwin defines as the *keys to the kingdom*.

How Luke, Margaret's ex-husband, and David (Margaret's son) battle with each other in each scene of the play marks an already rocky start to the illustration of the preacher's house. Baldwin writes in his introduction that this play reflects much of what happened in his own life with respect to his own relationship with his stepfather.[14] Baldwin only wanted his stepfather's love. His stepfather was a preacher, yet because of Baldwin's private life, it was challenging for Baldwin to find love from his father. In *The Amen Corner,* Baldwin takes his own story but instead of narrating a black man as the preacher, he tells the story of Luke's mother as the preacher. The preacher in this instance is seen as the enforcer, the ruler, the regulator; Margaret is forced to occupy the role as "leader" and "breadwinner" of her own house—a traditional position that usually men occupy in the household, especially in the 1950s. Yet from Baldwin's own words, it is through the portrayal of the black woman preacher in this text that dismantles the traditional role of the black woman in 1950s African-American literature.

As *The Amen Corner* takes place over the course of a week in Harlem, both the church and Sister Margaret's house are set within the same unit. From its literary illustration, the pulpitum or pulpit takes up the most room in the church. A chair fit for a high priestess sits atop the platform. As the congregants enter the church, a blues melody entitled "The Blues is Man" is heard. This sonic blues filling the air as bodies enter the sacred space of the church portends the developing contention in both Margaret's domestic and spiritual spaces.[15] Before Margaret's first sermon on 2 Kings chapter 20, the choir sings with raised voices of God's care. The first song that Baldwin includes gives a musical preface to Margaret's first sermon, *Set Thine House in Order*. The choir sings jubilantly,

> One day I walked the lonesome road
> The spirit spoke unto me
> And filled my heart with love,
> Yes, he filled my heart with love,
> And he wrote my name above,
> And that's why I thank God I'm in His care.
> (CHORUS)
> Let me tell you now
> Whilst I'm in His care,
> Jesus got His arms wrapped around me,
> No evil thoughts can harm me

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[13] "Keys to the Kingdom" is a recurring mantra in *The Amen Corner* as a response to Margaret's last sermon on love and the necessity to love both God and man.

[14] "The first line written in *The Amen Corner* is now Margaret's line in the Third Act: 'It's a awful thing to think about, the way love never dies!' That line, of course, says a great deal about me—the play says a great deal about me—but I was thinking not only, not merely, about the terrifying desolation of my private life but about the great burdens carried by my father. I was old enough by now, at last, to recognize the nature of the dues he had paid, old enough to wonder if I could possibly have paid them, old enough, at last, at last, to know that I had loved him and had wanted him to love me. I could see that the nature of the battle we had fought had been dictated by the fact that our temperaments were so fatally the same: neither of us could bend. And when I began to think about what had happened to him, I began to see why he was so terrified of what was surely going to happen to me. The Amen Corner comes somewhere out of that." (15).

[15] Before Margaret begins her first sermon and the choir sings "I'm So Glad I'm in His Care," Baldwin writes that a blues melody can be heard, "The Blues is Man" at sunrise. This blues insertion is especially important before the preacher's first sermon, portending what's to come over Margaret's house if she doesn't set it in order.

'Cause I'm so glad I'm in His care. (Baldwin 2013a)

Stepping up to the pulpit as she meets her congregation with resounding, repeated cries of exaltation, Margaret's first sermon entitled, "Set Thine House In Order" comes from 2 Kings Chapter 20, an exegetical and eschatological illustration of the urgency that besets Margaret's own house.[16] In this Scripture, King Hezekiah becomes gravely ill. He receives a prophecy from Isaiah saying, "Thus says the Lord: 'Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live.'"[17] King Hezekiah begins to pray after turning his face to the wall and says, " ... 'I pray, how I have walked before You in truth and with a loyal heart, have done what was good in Your sight.'"[18] Isaiah returns to Hezekiah from the Lord's command and tells him the Lord heard his prayer and as a result of the Lord adding fifteen years to Hezekiah's life, he is made well. In this sermon, Margaret preaches the importance of going to people who you know will pray for you—people who you know have a connection to God. Throughout the first sermon exists a call and response reminiscent of the black church choral tradition. The congregation meets her words with resounding responses of agreement, "Amen! Amen!" She tells her congregation,

> Now when the king got the message, amen, he didn't do like some of us do today. He didn't go running to no spiritualists, no, he didn't. He didn't spend a lot of money on no fancy doctors, he didn't break his neck trying to commit himself to Bellevue Hospital. He sent for the prophet, Isaiah. Amen. He sent for a saint of God. (Baldwin 2013b)

Margaret delivers a sermon of simplicity and comprehension, one to which her congregation can relate, but her words are like a hammer that dissolves the rock of immorality into diminutive pieces. Gesturing to her congregation with both hands, Margaret continues to preach:

> I know some of you think Sister Margaret's too hard on you. She don't want you to do this and she won't let you do that. Some of you say, 'Ain't no harm in reading the funny papers.' But children, yes, there's harm in it. While you reading them funny papers, your mind ain't on the Lord. And if your mind ain't stayed on Him, every hour of the day, Satan's going to cause you to fall. Amen! ... But a saint of God ain't got no business delivering liquor to folks all day—how you going to spend all day helping folks into hell and then think you going to come here in the evening and help folks into heaven? It can't be done. The Word tells me, No man can serve two masters! (Baldwin 2013c)

The contrast and conflict evident in Margaret's first sermon as she admonishes her flock to abandon contradictory ways is the same division that is illustrated in her own house. The divisiveness in her sermon breaks apart and displays the fissures of not only the people under her care in the church, but also the people under her influence in her own home. Baldwin uses these chasms in Margaret's sermon to show the collapsible pulpit on which she stands. The choral selection before her sermon "I'm So Glad I'm in His Care" is a gospel blues song recorded and written in 1941 by legendary gospel musician Sister Rosetta Tharpe. The figure in the song walks a lonesome road until his or her heart is filled with love. The double emphasis on "Yes, he filled my heart with love" is a sonic prophecy that Margaret encounters towards the end of the play. Baldwin chooses a song written by a gospel blues black woman musician to preface Margaret's "Set Thine House in Order" sermon. The blues music heard outside of the church, "The Blues is Man," illustrates the blue notes awaiting Margaret and her

[16] Margaret's first sermon, "Set Thine House in Order," comes from 2 Kings Chapter 20:1. In this passage, King Hezekiah's life is extended after he prays to God to deliver him from death. Isaiah, the prophet, comes to Hezekiah while he is sick and tells him what the Lord says, "'Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live.'" After the prophecy from Isaiah, King Hezekiah turns his face to the wall and prays to God to remember how he's walked in truth and loyalty in the eyes of the Lord. After King Hezekiah's prayer, the Lord tells Isaiah to return to Hezekiah and tell him that his life will be extended by 15 years. (2 Kings 20:1–20 NKJV).

[17] 2 Kings Chapter 20:1 (NKJV). Available online: www.biblegateway.com.

[18] 2 Kings Chapter 20: 2 (NKJV). Available online: www.biblegateway.com.

entire family. It's as if the blues melody prefaces the contentious relationships she encounters with both her estranged husband and son. Instead of the blues illustrated in the figure of man; the blues, in this instance, can also be evinced as woman, a black woman preacher whose sacred (public) and secular (private) worlds soon collide. In this context, Baldwin conveys the uses of the blues and perhaps in this instance, the uses of the gospel blues.

Margaret ends her sermon with music reflective of the text she preached.

> I got the holy spirit
> To help me run this race.
> I got the holy spirit,
> It appointed my soul a place.
> My faith looks up to heaven,
> I know up there I'll see
> The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit
> Watching over me. (Baldwin 2013d)

Just as Margaret's sermon and song penetrate the souls of the congregation with words as fire, the reaction of the congregation to the preached Word is like a strong, violent force of hand claps, foot stomping, shrieks of joy, hands waving loosely in the air, along with the zills of the tambourine shaking feverishly, having its own shout and holler. It is through Margaret's first sermon that we witness the preached word from Scripture acting as prophetic healing salve to her congregation, at the same time reflecting the hidden breaches in her own life.

The dichotomies of which Margaret preached are reflected in her life, as she's not only the breadwinner for her *house* but also the leader of her *church*. While the Amen Corner in her church shows unwavering support of her to her face, they surreptitiously converse about her actions behind her back. In this case, both Margaret's church and home suffer chasms. The "Amen Corner" is defined as a group of people who give "unwavering support." According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the Amen Corner is defined as "that part of a meeting-house occupied by persons who assist the preacher with occasional and irregular responses."[19] To say Amen means, "it is so." The word "Amen" offers an *affirming* belief or response to something said. Baldwin writes the hypocrisy of "The Amen Corner" in this play, as individuals who appear to be in "your corner" speak against you, claiming and accusing you of wrong. After her first sermon, the elders of the church question how Margaret can travel to the sister church in Philadelphia and "heal" them with her words, but her own church appears to be suffering under her leadership, according to the elders. This instance of Margaret's congregation speaking of her disparagingly behind her back is an example of the leadership of the black woman being challenged not only in her own house but also in the church. This is also an example of the blues sensibility that Dr. Otis Moss, III refers to—despair that not necessarily comes out in Scripture here, but also arises after the impact of the sermon. Margaret experiences blues sensibilities in her daily encounters with her congregation, but it is through the sermon that "hope" arises for her in the midst of despair.

During this period, it was unheard of to have a black woman in a leadership position, notwithstanding a preacher in the church unless they were the "mothers" of the church. The men and women, but mostly the men, of the church stand out against Margaret and her hegemony and disapprove of the fruit that her preaching tree produces. Brother Boxer, one of the elders of the church proclaims with anguish,

> The Word say, You going to know a tree by its fruit. And we ain't been seeing such good fruit from Sister Margaret. I want to know, how come she think she can rule a church when

[19] Corner, Amen. *OED*. University of Pennsylvania Library Online Database.

she can't rule her own house? That husband of hers is in there, dying in his sins, and that half-grown, hypocrite son of hers is just running all roads to hell. (Baldwin 2013f)

When Margaret is on the verge of losing the trust and faith of her congregants under her leadership, her older sister—Odessa—tells her to remember the vision. She admonishes Margaret to think back to the vision of the church she had before she lost the support of the Amen Corner. Margaret seems to be a woman of loss—loss of her husband and the loss of her son. She struggles to keep her house together. At the end of the play, Margaret does order her house—she may not be a pastor any longer, she may have lost the members of her congregation, but she did gain something and someone—love of herself, holding the keys to the kingdom.

The same way in which the hand of God delivers King Hezekiah from death after he prays fervently and turns his face to the wall reflects a similar order from Margaret. After Margaret realizes the elders of the church are having a meeting to depose her and she may lose her congregation, her sister, Odessa reminds her of the vision. She admonishes her of the time that it is to not be a woman but a *winner*:

Odessa: Maggie. It was you had the vision. It weren't me. You got to think back to the vision. If the vision was for anything, it was for just this day.

Margaret: All these years I prayed as hard as I knowed how. I tried to put my treasure in heaven where couldn't nothing get at it and take it away from me and leave me alone. I asked the Lord to hold my hand. I didn't expect that none of this would ever rise to hurt me no more. And all these years it just been waiting for me, waiting for me to turn a corner. And there it stand, my whole life, just like I hadn't never gone nowhere. It's a awful thing to think about, the way love never dies!

Odessa: You's got to pull yourself together and think how you can win. You always been the winner. Ain't no time to be a woman now. You can't let them throw you out of this church. What we going to do then? I'm getting old, I can't help you. And you ain't young no more, neither. (Baldwin 2013g)

In "The Politics of Black Feminist Thought," Patricia Hill Collins describes nineteenth-century writer, educator, abolitionist, and activist, Maria Stewart's assertion of the importance of black women's relationships within themselves and with each other as mothers, activists, and intellectuals. Collins quotes Stewart: "'O, ye mothers, what a responsibility rests on you!' Stewart preached, 'You have souls committed to your charge. . . . It is you that must create in the minds of your little girls and boys a thirst for knowledge, the love of virtue . . . and the cultivation of a pure heart.'" (Collins 2000a) To Stewart, "the power of self-definition was essential, for black women's survivial was at stake."[20] In the text, Odessa's words shift Margaret from the marginalized position of woman in which her church places her, to winner, helping Margaret in the play realize and redefine what it means to be a woman in general but a black woman preacher in particular. A winner is a victor, champion, conqueror, and heroine. Odessa helps Margaret implement what Patricia Hill Collins calls in *Black Feminist Thought* the "power of self-definition." This power is ultimately attained from within the self, but at times, the community of believers who don't let the vision inside die awakens this force. Collins refers to particular black women characters from Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* to Janie in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, who enact the power of self-definition through writing letters or through the performance of telling their stories. Collins writes:

According to many African-American women writers, no matter how oppressed an individual woman may be, the power to save the self lies within the self. Other Black women may assist a Black woman in this journey toward personal empowerment, but the ultimate

[20] Collins (1).

> responsibility for self-definitions and self-valuations lies within the individual woman herself. (Collins 2000b)

Odessa helps Margaret redefine womanhood, displacing her outside of oppression and marginalization that the black woman endures to a space of victory, not defeat. While Odessa helps Margaret realize her true position, it is *Margaret* who finishes the duty of self-definition. After Luke's death, Margaret delivers her last sermon. When Luke dies, he and Margaret reconcile, but it is not until the last sermon in the play where she realizes what it means to grasp fully the *keys to the kingdom*: love of neighbor and love of self.

> Margaret: Children. I'm just now finding out what it means to love the Lord. It ain't all in the singing and the shouting. It ain't all in the reading of the Bible. (*She unclenches her first a little*.) It ain't even—it ain't even—in running all over everybody trying to get to heaven. To love the Lord is to love all His children—all of them, everyone!—and suffer with them and rejoice with them and never count the cost!
>
> (Silence. She turns and leaves the pulpit.)
>
> Sister Moore: Bless our God! He give us the victory! I'm gonna feast on milk and honey.
>
> *(Margaret comes down the stairs. She stands in the kitchen. Odessa comes downstairs. Without a word to Margaret, she goes through Luke's room, taking off her robe as she goes. The lights dim down in the church, dim up on Margaret, as Margaret starts toward the bedroom, and falls beside Luke's bed. The scrim comes down. One or two people pass in the street.)* (Baldwin 2013h)

Margaret cautions her congregation that even when they think the world is not watching them, their eyes are fixed on the actions of the Christian. She emphasizes the importance of her congregation to live holy, sanctified, and set apart from the "world." Baldwin writes Margaret Alexander's character out of inspiration from a South Carolina pastor at Mt. Calvary Assembly Hall of the Pentecostal Faith Church for All Nations, named Rosa Artimus Horn. Horn inspires the writing of *The Amen Corner*'s protagonist, for Baldwin recalls his own conversion experience at Mt. Calvary, propelling him to connect the Pentecostal culture of spiritual expression to the culture of theater. Baldwin writes in his introduction to *The Amen Corner*: "I knew that out of the ritual of the church, historically speaking, comes the act of the theatre, the communion which is the theatre. And I knew that what I wanted to do in the theater was to recreate the moments I remembered as a boy preacher, to involve the people, even against their will, to shake them up, and, hopefully, to change them." (XVI)[21]

Margaret mentions the mantra "Set Thine House in Order" on two occasions in her first sermon. Baldwin purposefully writes this scriptural mantra of setting one's house in order because he wants us as readers to decipher the dichotomies and contradictions that beset the preacher's household. Baldwin is not only writing about a doctor, a lawyer, a secretary in these texts. He specifically chooses the *black woman preacher figure* in literature to position her at a level of high esteem only to reveal the imperfections that she has as a flawed woman preacher/character. In this context, black women were not necessarily placed in positions of eminence, leadership, and moral authority. For Baldwin to place a black woman in a position of high esteem, not only generally but particularly within the church, when black women's voices were not even welcomed in the pulpit, is telling to the kinds of realities and many inconsistencies that surround the black church, particularly in the relationship between black men and women in the church. Baldwin has a message here: it is the Word that these black women characters plant as seeds in the hearts of the congregation, but when they leave the church, their sermonic/preacherly presence becomes even more palpable *outside* the walls of ecclesia.

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[21] Baldwin's connection of the communion in church to the culture of theater is expressed in the preface to *The Amen Corner*. Hardy also refers to Baldwin's discourse of the communion of the church matching theater in his essay, "James Baldwin as Religious Writer: The Burdens and Gifts of Black Evangelicalism" (67).

No Greater Love

> "Love the Lord Your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandement greater than these."[22]

In reimagining the figure of the black woman preacher in African-American literature, readers witness Margaret's spiritual metamorphosis from the beginning to the end of the play. We begin to see her sermonic platform have greater depth for own body and spirit. Margaret enters the play as an imperfect, judgmental (in the eyes of her congregants) character in the pulpit, yet when she departs the pulpit at the end of the play and in her last sermon, she realizes that the house she needed to set in order was her own. When she realizes the true value of a sermon preached in love, not only did her perspective change but her newfound epiphany of what it means to love God *and* people resonates with the rest of her congregation, as well. The black women preachers of which Baldwin writes don't remain preachers in the conventional sense, yet they evolve outside of what the conventions of their position meant to them. Alexander leaves the church and gives her last sermon on love. Baldwin shows readers that Margaret is never fully herself in the beginning of the novel. What she learns *most* about herself is when she steps *out* of the confines of the pulpit into her own "power of self-definition." Margaret transforms as a character in the play and leaves the church from her own realization of the deep impact of self-definition and self-love. There is an evolution of the preacherly position here and Baldwin's critique of the church is reflected when Margaret leaves the church and steps outside of her traditional roles. Love of self and love of others augments Margaret's sermonic power and impact outside of the walls of the church. As readers, we begin to see the preacherly pulpit form more and more—with greater shape, greater depth and breadth. The arc of this play sees the pulpit get bigger—wider. However, the pulpit does not necessarily always come in the form of a platform in a magnanimous church edifice; rather, the pulpit is what the black woman makes it to be. The pulpit is that sermonic space where the black woman gives instruction and correction. The pulpit is where the black woman preacher then becomes visible, breaking down the wall of subjugation and invisibility with her words for others and for herself. Baldwin shifts our level of thinking that is locked into traditions of believing the man as the ultimate moderator of authority and brings in the black woman—the black woman who is often thought of as the mule of the world, who works, toils, travails assiduously, is castigated but is brought back as a renewed, powerful figure holding the *keys to the kingdom.*

Rather than present a monolith of the church, Baldwin illustrates the variances, imperfections and dissonance in the black church. In *The Amen Corner*, he presents the church as a multidimensional space with many layers that are uncovered from the immoral actions and betrayals of the congregation. Baldwin writes in his introduction to *The Amen Corner* that Sister Margaret's "sense of reality [was] dictated by society's assumption, which also becomes her own, of her inferiority. Her need for human affirmation, and also for vengeance, expresses itself in her merciless piety; and her love, which is real but which is also at the mercy of genuine and absolutely justifiable terror, turns her into a tyrannical matriarch." (Baldwin 2013e) Margaret voices most articulately the freedom that she "acquires" at the end of the play, and in the text, Margaret's sermons exhale upon dry bones, commanding herself and her listeners to hear the psalmic sound of the Spirit, to move with hind's feet as "historical agents" that effect change, and with eagle eyes watch God.

In conclusion, Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* illustrates through Margaret Alexander, the black woman preacher as blues heroine through a gospel-blues lens. Channeling Chanta M. Haywood's concept of the importance of recognizing the element of the prophetic in African American literature, Baldwin's entire oeuvre is often composed as prophecy; it is a sermonic trajectory of the African

[22] Mark 12:30–31 (New International Version).

Diaspora from the Middle Passage to the streets of Harlem and even to the twenty-first century. It is a call and response prophecy that speaks openly about the social and cultural issues of this nation from a sermonic platform. It is the reason why Amiri Baraka aptly labels Baldwin as "God's black revolutionary mouth," for Baldwin asserts, "To rule over and control the course of people's lives is an awesome responsibility. An emissary of God must practice the love of God...one who is incapable of love should not instruct. Love will overcome power . . . To love man is to love God. To preach [the] love of God and live without the love of man will lead to disaster for the wrath of the righteous is great [inevitably]. The need of love is greater than the need of glory."[23]

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[23] Baldwin Archives at the Schomburg Center in Harlem, NY (Box 29; Folder 9; Page 5).

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Article

"Precious Lord": Black Mother-Loss and the Roots of Modern Gospel

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Abstract: Thomas Dorsey's 1932 gospel song *Take My Hand, Precious Lord* is one of modern gospel music's most canonical works. Although its composition by Dorsey in the wake of his wife's sudden death in childbirth is a widely known oral history, the cultural implications of a wider history of health care disparities in the US leading to higher rates of black maternal and infant mortality have not been seriously considered. This article studies the history of black maternal and infant mortality in Chicago during the Great Migration as it bears on the mournful sounds of the gospel blues and its gender-inflected beginnings. The history of early gospel, I argue, was profoundly influenced by black women's sympathetic identification with the experiences of migration and mother-loss Nettie Dorsey's death represents. While Thomas Dorsey is distinguished as "the father of gospel music," Nettie Dorsey might be fruitfully imagined as the spectral "mother" of gospel in its mournful expressions of black women's spiritual consciousness. As such, she stands in for an alternate history of modern gospel musicality, one helping African American religious and musical history see and hear better what Emily Lordi calls "black feminist resonance" in black musical production in the golden age of gospel.

Keywords: gospel music; Thomas Dorsey; Nettie Dorsey; blues; maternal death; infant mortality; hapticality

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> We did not know the truth or believe it when we heard it. Motherhood! What was it? We did not know or greatly care.
>
> —W. E. B. Dubois, "The Damnation of Women"

> There was a stirring, a movement of mud and dead leaves. She thought of the women at Chicken Little's funeral. The women who shrieked over the bier and at the lip of the open grave. What she had regarded since as unbecoming behavior seemed fitting now; they were screaming at the neck of God, his giant nape, the vast back-of-the-head that he had turned on them in death. But it seemed to her now that it was not a fist-shaking grief they were keening but rather a simple obligation to say something, do something, feel something about the dead. They could not let that heart-smashing event pass unrecorded, unidentified. It was poisonous, unnatural to let the dead go with a mere whimpering, a slight murmur, a rose bouquet of good tastes . . . The body must move and throw itself about, the eyes must roll, the hands should have no peace, and the throat should release all the yearning, despair, and outrage that accompany the stupidity of loss.
>
> —Toni Morrison, *Sula*

1. Introduction

Thomas Dorsey's 1932 gospel song *Take My Hand, Precious Lord* is one of modern gospel music's most enduring works. Recorded by such musical luminaries as Mahalia Jackson, Rosetta Tharpe, The Blind Boys of Alabama, Elvis Presley and Aretha Franklin, it is one of modern gospel's founding

hymns. Famously performed by Jackson as the Atlanta funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr., by Aretha Franklin at the Chicago memorial service for Jackson, and by opera diva Leontyne Price at the state funeral for President Lyndon B. Johnson, *Take My Hand, Precious Lord* (hereafter *Precious Lord*) is arguably black America's most time-honored requiem. No less an icon than Beyoncé Knowles did her part at the 2015's 57th Annual Grammy Awards to extend *Precious Lord*'s own iconic status into the hip hop age, performing it live on stage. Remarkable as it seems, the longevity of *Precious Lord* in African American cultural life and lament might have been predicted.

The history of *Precious Lord*'s inspiration in the wake of the sudden death of Dorsey's wife, Nettie, in childbirth has long been a part of the apocryphal history of black gospel since gospel's very earliest days, rare indeed is the consideration of that larger history of black maternal and infant mortality, the particular grief over which *Precious Lord* gives anguished expression, that vexes black women's material and spiritual experience until today spoken of coincidentally. Uncommon as it is, I argue that black women's religious history and the mid-century history of modern gospel are diminished except that a serious and sustained reflection on the tenacious intersectionalities of death, black motherhood, lamentation, and the racial politics of women's reproductive health care is soon brought to bear on them. The history of early gospel, specifically, could not but have been profoundly influenced by black women's sympathetic identification with the experiences of migration and mother-loss. Against the reflexiveness of gospel music's reverence for Thomas Dorsey as "the father" of that form, to imagine *Nettie* Dorsey as gospel's spectral "mother" instead, which is to say gospel's earliest forbear, is to offer up the possibility of an alternate history of the modern gospel sound, one helping African American religious and musical histories see and hear better what we might call, with the deepest debt to Emily Lordi, "black feminist resonance" in early and late black musical production by black women and men.[1]

2. "Hear My Cry . . . ": Mourning Mother-Loss

Nettie Dorsey's pregnancy had been routine up to that fateful day in late August when she entered labor. Dorsey was away in St. Louis, promoting his music by conducting a series of workshops aimed at teaching the new music to local church soloists, choirs and music directors. When her unusual or uncontrollable breathing rhythms grew too concerning to ignore, Dorsey's uncle saw Nettie to the hospital. "But when she went there on August 25 after beginning labor," Michael Harris tells us, "no beds were available" (Harris 1994, p. 217). Hours later, Nettie Dorsey, just twenty-five years old, died at home in childbirth.

Scarcely articulable was the anguish Thomas Dorsey endured at the sudden and wholly unforeseen death of his young wife who was due to deliver their first child seven years after their 1925 marriage. Many years later, Dorsey offered this poignant recounting of Nettie's passing in his own words:

> Anyways, I was in a revival, and my wife was to become a mother. I went away with the feeling that . . . ehh . . . she'd make a lovely, lovely mother when I'd come back . . . {Nettie was] well when I left home and they sent for me to come to the door. [A messenger] brought me a telegram. I took it and read it. Almost fell out. Says, "Hurry home! Your wife just died." And I don't know how you would accept that. I couldn't accept it at all. And . . . ehh . . . a friend of mine put me in the car. And took me right home. I got home, jumped out and ran in, to see if it was really true. And one of the girls just started crying, said "Nettie just died. Nettie just died! NETTIE JUST DIED!" and fell in the floor. The baby was left alive, but in the next two days the baby died! Now what should I do then and there? And then they tried to tell me things that would soothe—be soothing to me. But none of it's *never* been soothing to me. From that day to this day. (Nierenberg 1982)

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[1] On her "black resonance," see (Lordi 2013).

Captured on film in the 1982 documentary *Say Amen, Somebody* by George T. Nierenberg, Dorsey, still brooding, recalled the tragedy fifty years on, his weathered leathery voice rising and falling, his arms orchestral in gesticulative accompaniment. No words brought any comfort, he remembered, as friends "tried to tell me things that would soothe me" (Nierenberg 1982).

Nettie Dorsey's unexpected death must have felt like cruel irony to Thomas Dorsey whose career from 1908 to 1926 was built around the blues. An erstwhile blues and jazz pianist who had made a name for himself as a composer, arranger and band leader for blues legend Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Dorsey would experience Nettie's death as a blues woe deeper than any he had known performing alongside Rainey as "Georgia Tom." Struggling to cope with the single greatest tragedy of his life, Dorsey sought consolation in a more devotional sound than had ever been heard in the blues. Emblematic of the overlay of sacred text and poetics upon the sound of blues music that would come to be called 'gospel blues' years before gospel was its own genre, commercially speaking, *Take My Hand, Precious Lord*, perhaps gospel music's most widely published song, was born of the unique marriage between Dorsey's unremitting despair, traditional Christian hymnody (viz., George N. Allen's *Maitland*), and a common blues impulse toward flattened thirds. With surprising theatricality so many years later, Dorsey narrated the affective history of *Precious Lord*'s sudden, even soothing, irruption into his swelling grief before Nierenberg's camera.

> [T]wo fellas come by—I forget their names—they were friends of mine. And ... ehh ... they were telling me about it, and I says, "I don't know what to do, and I don't know how to do." And ... ahh ... —I just tried to make my little talk to the Lord, but it was wasting, I think. And ... ehh ... I called the Lord some—one thing, and one of the others said, "Noooo! That's not his name." Said, "Precious Lord!" I said that just sounds good. Got several amens on Precious Lord. And ladies and gentlemen, believe it or not, I started singing right then and there *Precious Lo-o-o-o-r-r-d-d/take my han-n-n-n-d/ Le-e-e-e-a-a-e-e-a-a-d me o-o-o-o-u-u-o-o-n-n/And let me stan-n-d/ I-I-I-I-I am tired/ I am weak/ I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I am worn* ... (Nierenberg 1982)

If Dorsey's telling of happenings fifty years after the fact does not convey the event of *Precious Lord*'s composition plainly, Harris explains baldly in *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church* that Dorsey had been at the piano fiddling at the keyboard, when, as Dorsey recalled above, he "tried to make [his] little talk to the Lord." According to Harris, "Dorsey had no intention of composing at that moment" (Harris 1994, p. 228). Yet, the song came on forcefully, abruptly, as from beyond the beyond of the piano's play. Put differently, one might say, after Ashon Crawley, that *Precious Lord* issued out of a sociality of black mourning that "dislodges notions of authorship and genius as individuating and productive of enlightened, bourgeois subjectivity from the capacity to create, to carry, to converge to conceal" (Crawley 2016, p. 136). In spite of Dorsey, then (and yet with him in any case), *Precious Lord* appears to have always been already in the flow of being written, composed as it was out of the brooding performance of what Crawley calls, discerningly, "nothing music," that "ever-overflowing excessive nothingness" that Dorsey called "wasting." At times referred to as "'soft chording,' 'padding,' [or] 'talk music,'" Crawley explains,

> Nothing music is the connective tissue, the backgrounded sound, of [black] church services heard before and after songs, while people are giving weekly announcements, before the preacher 'tunes up' and after the service ends. Ask a musician, "what are you playing?" and –with a coy, shy smile—he/she will say, "nothing." (Crawley 2016, pp. 123, 136)

"Nothing" is a particularly fitting reply to the question of what it is one has been heard playing since the playing is (rather) a performance of anticipatory *listening(-for)*. Accordingly,

> ... meaning is made through the inclined ear, through the anticipation, the materiality of nothing, the vibratory frequency of black thought, of the *more to come* that *has not yet arrived* ... And we hear this in the musician's virtuosity: they uphold, they carry, they anticipate,

> through the performance of "nothing" [but a searching listening]—it is not a song, it is not a melody; we might call it improvisation, though that implies a structure upon which he is building. With the playing of nothing music, there is a certain lack of attention, a sort of insouciance with which one plays, a holy nonchalance: being both fully engaged in the moment while concentration is otherwise than the music . . . (Crawley 2016, p. 136)

Dorsey was not so much playing the piano, I mean to argue, as he was listening through it, trying "to make [his] little talk with the Lord" out of other than words when abruptly what he was listening *into* (without knowing suppositionally what he was listening *for*), "the sound of the gift of [an] unconcealment" (ibid, p. 136) finds *him*: "And ladies and gentlemen, believe it or not, I started singing right then and there *Precious Lo-o-o-r-r-d-d* . . . " As Harris writes, "In essence, Dorsey finally had given his gospel blues music a truly complementary blues text" (Harris 1994, p. 239).

If, in *Say Amen, Somebody*, an certain incoherence pertains to Dorsey's recollection of the immaculate conception of *Precious Lord* out of "nothing," it is surely owed to a similarly searching nothingness performed in (between) speech and silence as Dorsey "makes [his] little talk" to Nierenberg on camera, calling up again what he cannot forget ("[N]one of it's *never* been soothing to me. From that day to this day") about the experience of mourning as an elemental condition of black life.[2] To be clear, though, the mournfulness of *Precious Lord*, its low-register lament and supplication, exceeds the mere mood of it as Dorsey heard it breaking in on nothing. In *Precious Lord*, mourning follows (black) memory. Memory is its essential tinder.

Under the spell of *Precious Lord*'s composition, Thomas Dorsey, one might say, was *afflicted* by memory. Which is to say, so completely prepossessed with the fact of black dying coming, again and again, ever nearer to him that the dread of it was, in a word, crippling, reducing Dorsey, musically speaking, to nothing but (the very generativity of) "excessive nothingness." As Dorsey sat at the piano in the wake of Nettie's and the newborn's passing, *Precious Lord* materialized no more out of nothing's thin air ("I started singing right then and there . . . ") than from the denser ethereality of memory. Memories, as James Baldwin put it, of "what happened" reconstituted in and as the gospel sound (Baldwin [1979] 2000, p. 109). In *Say Amen, Somebody*, it is, to echo Baldwin again, "what happened to him . . . and what is certainly going to happen to you" Dorsey's singing performs (Baldwin [1979] 2000, p. 109). In the vernacular voice of Hall Montana, the main character and narrator of Baldwin's novel *Just Above My Head* (1979), Baldwin ventriloquizes this eidetic instinct in black gospel performance:

> Niggers can sing gospel as no other people can because they aren't singing gospel—if you see what I mean. When a nigger quotes the Gospel, his is not quoting: he is telling you what happened to him today, and what is certainly going to happen to you tomorrow: it may be that it has already happened to you, and that you, poor soul, don't know it. In which case, *Lord have mercy!* Our suffering is our bridge to one another. Everyone much cross this bridge, or die while he still lives—but this is not a political, still less, a popular apprehension. *Oh, there wasn't no room*, sang Crunch, *no room! At the inn!* He was not singing about a road in Egypt two thousand years ago, but about his mama and his daddy and himself, and those streets are just outside, brother, just outside every door, those streets which you and I both walk and which we are going to walk until we meet. (Baldwin [1979] 2000, p. 109)

That Baldwin should imagine a nineteen-year-old gospel quartet singer, "Crunch" Hogan, singing "*Oh, there wasn't no room . . . At the inn!*" specifically as illustrative of the eidetic particularities of black gospel (" . . . they aren't singing gospel . . . he is telling you want happened to him today")

[2] Though Dorsey's memory of the genesis of *Precious Lord* has the sense of an *ex nihilo* creation, Harris informs us that *Precious Lord* owes a significant debt melodically to George Nelson Allen's 1852 hymn *Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone* although "Dorsey seems to have begun playing *Must Jesus* in an improvisatory mode, adding his ornamentation to Allen's song. By doing so he was already assuming compositional control . . . though his familiar blues 'trills' and 'turns'" (Harris 1994, p. 237).

testifies to an acuity about the structurally and experientially disinherited condition of black life in the white West which few besides Baldwin have been apportioned in such oracular measure. For Crunch's gospel indexes, something other and more than material dispossession and the sort of rootless wandering—"constant," "desperate," and "search[ing]"—extemporized by black folks' blues, as Amiri Baraka (né Le Roi Jones) once noted in *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (Jones 1963, p. 64). It rings with rejection as well, with the indignities of everyday denials, ritualized by law, heaped upon black citizen-subjects turned away from, and forced out of, hotels, restaurants, retail establishments, public schools, white churches, movie houses, libraries, and—as Dorsey would be reminded, painfully—public hospitals.

3. What Nettie Knew: Jim Crow in the Early Hospital Age

According to Harris, Dorsey and Nettie had planned for Nettie to deliver, he wrote, "at a hospital" (Harris 1994, p. 217). Against the banality of this rather minor detail, however, lies a modern history of race and reproduction critical to understanding at once the tragedy that was to befall Nettie and the "bridge," following Baldwin, Dorsey was to cross up to and through his "telling you what happened to him today, and what is certainly going to happen to you tomorrow" in *Precious Lord*. We forget, more specifically, that before the 1930s, babies were born far more often in homes than in hospitals. It was not until the 1930s that a movement to radically improve the hygienic conditions of hospitalization, especially around women's and infants' health, rendered hospitals preferred birthing sites (Curry n.d.). For most black women living in Chicago, segregated on the South Side of the city, the cultural shift from childbirth as a domestic event to the obstetrical scientism of the hospital as a new birthing center was at best an incomplete one, stymied by a medical caste system that limited medical services for African Americans to a city-wide corps of itinerant public health nurses, medical dispensaries, and two city hospitals: Cook County Hospital and Provident Hospital.

According to medical historian Lynne Curry, "Many of Chicago's local health centers and neighborhood medical dispensaries either did not admit black patients at all or set aside a restricted number of hours for African Americans in order to keep them separated from their white clientele" (Curry 1999, p. 36). In the face of so much discrimination, the two hundred thousand black Chicagoans who migrated to the city from points south between 1910 and 1930 turned to the only two public hospitals in Chicago to welcome African American, immigrant and indigent patients. Cook County, a twenty-one-year-old, 3000-bed complex in 1932, was set on the near West Side. Provident, founded by the pioneering black clinician, Daniel Hale Williams, almost thirty years after Cook County, was a significantly smaller operation, with just "seventy-five beds" in 1932, but set conveniently on the corner of 36th and Dearborn in the city's black South Side (Matthews 1961, p. 213). Very probably, the arrangement Thomas and Nettie Dorsey made for Nettie's hospital delivery was with Provident. Living then at the home of Dorsey's uncle, Joshua, at 448 East 40th Street, Provident, was less than two miles away (Figure 1). That already, by 1915, 90% of Provident's patients were African American, that it was a few miles closer to their South Side home than Cook County, and that it "remained one of the premier black hospitals" in the nation in 1932 all recommended Provident (Gamble 1995, p. 133). With but seventy-five beds, however, Provident could hardly keep pace with the demand occasioned by the Great Relocation of black Southerners north. Though Provident aspired to become "a black medical mecca in Chicago," as one historian put it, it could not have imagined the unprecedented numbers of African Americans who would converge on the city, mecca-like, to overwhelm that dream (Gamble 1995, p. 132). By the mid-1920s, only thirty years following its heralded founding, Provident, Curry writes, "had severely deteriorated under exorbitant pressures to meet virtually all of the health care needs of Chicago's black population, which had burgeoned during the First World War. The availability of health care services for African Americans simply could not keep pace with their numbers migrating into the city" (Curry 1999, p. 147). If the Dorseys assumed that what Harris refers to as their "pre-paid arrangement" for Nettie's hospital delivery (which we may supposed to have

been planned for Provident) guaranteed a bed for Nettie there, nearby, when the time came, the young couple was sadly, tragically, in error.

Figure 1. Certificate of Death, No. 25300, "NETTIE DORSEY (Col)" (30 September 1932).

Whatever may have accounted for Nettie Dorsey's unavoidable home delivery, it was Jim Crow's iron-clad commitment to white social supremacy and to policies of separate and unequal health care delivery in the early hospital age that not only crippled Provident's efforts to tender "[p]roper care to the sick and the injured without regard to race, creed or color," undoubtedly filling its seventy-five beds often (if not always) but doomed black women and infants in Chicago to maternal and infant

mortality rates not less than those of the pre-hospital era (Curry 1999, p. 147).[3] Unknown as it was to white Americans, black infant and maternal mortality was already a "crisis" at the start of the twentieth century. Nationally, the mortality rates of black mothers and children in this period "exceeded those of whites by as much as 50 percent; [and] recent demographic analyses have suggested that the single most important variable in predicting childhood mortality at this time was in fact race" (Curry 1999, p. 55). In Chicago, maternal mortality rates among black women were indeed higher than the national average, "a tragic state of affairs ... attributed to the lack of high quality obstetrical care available to African Americans in Chicago," Curry writes (Curry 1999, p. 55). Thus, the precarity of black women's reproductive health was to become a significant aspect of the racial health care gap in Chicago and the country before 1930. It could scarcely be chance that when Dorsey and then-musical collaborator Theodore Frye introduced *Precious Lord* to the congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church less than a month after Nettie's death, its singing (by Frye on this occasion) was met with ecstatic affirmations of black women "shouting," erupting in intensities of mother-loss and sympathetic feeling. "The folk went wild," Dorsey recalled. "They broke up the church. Folk were shouting everywhere" (Harris 1994, p. 241). To be sure, not all those who were moved to a shouting feeling at Ebenezer that historic Sunday morning were women—at least Dorsey does not say they were as the "folk" he remembered breaking up the church are not explicitly gendered as women here. Still, Dorsey persisted elsewhere in associating shouting as an enfleshed feeling, as "a grasping of the heart," with women specifically. "I seen women in the audience [of blues sets] jump up, so touched ... *–jump up like you shouting in church* [emphasis added]. I've seen that right in the theater." In churches and theaters alike, women "jump up and wring and shout," Dorsey observed (Harris 1994, p. 96).

4. Come Sunday: Early Gospel and Black Women's Haptical Experience

If Dorsey was not specific enough about the closer association of women congregants to shouting, vernacular artist Lisa D. Cain put her memory of the gender dynamics of this indeterminate form of "social ecstasy"—indeterminant because one never knows for sure whether this shouting is "falling out, fainting, swooning and loud vocalizations" or a raging dance—in balder terms (Crawley 2017, pp. 98–99)[4]:

> In addition to the Pastor, there were individuals in church I will never forget. I will always remember a lady named Cuttin Torch who would bring sticks of peppermint candy to church to give to the children after Sunday School. Cuttin Eddie Mae made the best peanut brittle that one could eat. Even the small roles were important and everyone worked together ... The ushers wore white and were very important. They passed out fans, held the shouting women, delivered messages, directed people to their seats and took up the collection. They also administered smelling salt to women who fainted from shouting or had fallen out from grieving at a funeral. As a child watching someone shout was fascinating. The individual would get emotional, feel the spirit, throw back their arms, fling them around and people would rush to hold them. Men rarely shouted. (Cain 2011, p. 14)

Although Cain's memory of the theater of shouting women she describes here is set far from Chicago in Canton, Mississippi, these were the kinswomen, daughters and grand-daughters, of those who made their way to Chicago in the vast exodus of the first Great Migration. To be sure, Mississippi was spectacularly represented in that flow headed north to Chicago. Chicago connected so easily to Canton by way of Jackson, Tennessee, east of Memphis, that it came to be called by

[3] Between 1910 and 1920, to take one measure, the black population of Chicago grew by 148.5% as compared to the more modest 21% increase in the white population during the same period. As the numbers of black migrants moving into Chicago's South Side were far too great for the region's single black hospital to provide for South Side's public health and medical care, "as late as 1946," Curry writes, a report of the US Public Health Service allowed that "the racial health care gap" from the intervening years between WWI to WWII "had not been significantly reduced" at all (Curry 1999, p. 147).

[4] On the indeterminacy of shouting's performativity, see (Crawley 2017), especially pp. 108ff.

many migrants "North Mississippi." As Isabel Wilkerson would write in *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, Chicago's black belt saw "Baptist, Holiness, [and] African Methodist Episcopal churches practically transported from Mississippi and [neighboring] Arkansas" (Wilkerson 2010, p. 269). Cain's "shouting women," I mean to say, are not distant cousins to Dorsey's theater-going women who "*jump up like you shouting in church*." They *are* those women—Saturday, "touched" by the blues; Sunday, "shouting everywhere."

Alternately "grotesque," "awful," even "funny," as Dubois had written so many years earlier, and ranging in expression "from the silent rapt countenance or the low murmur and moan to the mad abandon of physical fervor—the stamping, shrieking, and shouting, the rushing to and fro and wild waving of arms, the weeping and laughing, the vision and the trance," this frenzied "shouting everywhere," far from the din of a wild, unmeaning pandemonium, is rather a fulfilment of a liberative sociality it would not be reductive to regard as according to historical black womanist impulses (DuBois [1903] 1982, p. 212).[5] Which is to argue, more particularly, for *Precious Lord* as an acoulogical voicing of mother-loss, *Nettie's* primarily, in sympathy to which black women's shouting sounds forth a lament and disruption of the anti-black order of urban American flourishing, in general, and of modern reproductive health care, in particular. If, as Sydney Lewis has written in *Hospital: An Oral History of Cook County Hospital*, "the walls separating a public hospital from the street are permeable" and "the human toll taken by poverty, racism, violence and despair" are localized in the hospital (including its over-crowding[6] which, as Nettie Dorsey's example highlights, renders the permeability of the hospital walls of a class of speech not literal but more than merely symbolic), then the shouting church, insofar as shouting may be viewed in the light of black women's everyday performance practices, is a counter public sphere of voluble dissent and creative, kinetic suffering (Lewis 1995, p. xv). At Ebenezer, in the haunted/haunting vibrato-space first established by the cantorial sensitivities of Dankmar Adler, a pioneering Jewish-American architect, for the acoustical design of the Reformed Isaiah Temple synagogue thirty-three years earlier, the shouting reaction Dorsey's *Precious Lord* induced among those black women in attendance at the song's September 1932

[5] "Womanist" insofar as the range of black women's shouting acts issue from, and are reflective of, a complex of Afro-Protestant religious sensibilities that understand faith as in keeping with a panoply of social and intellectual commitments including, especially, anti-racism, anti-sexism, black feminist thought, black women's health, biblical and ecclesial inclusiveness, and economic justice. Black womanist theologian, Emilie Townes, approached this womanist sociality as pertaining to black women's shouting in a 2006 verse, "they came because of the wailing":

> they came because of the wailing
> the wailing of so many voices
> who had a strong song
> but were choking from the lack of air
> they came because of the weeping
> the weeping of so many tears
> that came so freely
> on hot but determined faces
> they came because of the hoping
> the hoping of the beating heart
> the fighting spirit
> the mother wit tongues
> the dancing mind
> the world in their eyes
> they came because they had no choice
> to form a we
> that is many women strong
> and growing
> (Townes 2006, p. 251)

[6] Between 1910 and 1920, to take one measure, the black population of Chicago grew by 148.5% as compared to the more modest 21% increase in the white population during the same period. As the numbers of black migrants moving into Chicago's South Side were far too great for the region's single black hospital to provide for South Side's public health and medical care, "as late as 1946," Curry writes, a report of the US Public Health Service allowed that "the racial health care gap" from the intervening years between WWI to WWII "had not been significantly reduced" at all (Curry 1999, p. 147).

introduction was at once a wailing and a "wild" non-cooperation with the forces of racial exclusion, discrimination, violence and official forms of neglect in the material world of black mother-loss. Movingly that Sunday, *Precious Lord* realized a black womanist structure of feeling, intensely and excessively sonified, that could be nothing other than that which Fred Moten and Stephano Harney have called, in a word, "hapticality, or love."

"[T]o gather dispossessed feelings in common to create a new feel," as Moten and Harney put it, was the gift of gospel to black people (Harney and Moten 2013, p. 97). As a "vehicle for feeling," a "grasping of the heart," as Dorsey himself imagined it, modern gospel emerged not so much as a distinctive musical form, genre, or repertoire of techniques as it did the general form and sound of an "insurgent feel" for/after the black modern. That feeling-for, which was also a feeling-after, at once an empathic identification (feeling-for as feeling with) and an exploratory moving-toward (feeling-after as feeling for), summoned a loud hapticality beyond Dorsey's design or understanding. His surprise at the extraordinary power of *Precious Lord* to set the church ablaze with ecstatic feeling, and his wonder at "what they were shouting for. I was the one who should be shouting ... or sorry" was a man's disbelief only (Harris 1994, p. 241). Backgrounded by what was, at the time of its first singing, a very public account of the song's tragic, though not irregular, inspiration, *Precious Lord* was always already tuned to a lower frequency of hearing than Dorsey, as the "father" of modern gospel, could have felt. Like few other gospel compositions since, *Precious Lord* could not but bear the heard memory of years of modern black *mother*-loss in its mournful, moaning excesses. Just as the ecstatic response to *Precious Lord* at Chicago's Ebenezer surely contained "the dissonance of several generations of cultural conflict" over the relative immanence of God in the social world of men and women; for example, as Harris has argued (God was concerned for, not aloof from, the social conditions of the faithful, an emergent liberal theology affirmed), the hope of the singer who pleads at each stanza's end *Take my hand* ... *lead me home* just as surely brought into discordant combination the plaintive welcome of death (*Lead me on to the light*) and a middle-class dream-wish of domestic constancy (*Lead me home*).

Precious Lord, take my hand.
Lead me on, let me stand.
I am tired, I am weak, and worn.
Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light.
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me home.

When my way grows drear,
Precious Lord, lead me near,
When my life is almost gone.
Hear my cry, hear my call.
Hold my hand, lest I fall.
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me home.

When the darkness appears
And the night draws near
And the day is past and gone
At the river I stand
Guide my feet, hold my hand
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me home.

Between the melancholia of "the night draw[ing] near," that is, and the bright hopes of the many thousand migrants in search of a northern "home," *Precious Lord* achieved an improbable agreement of feeling in any case. "There's no sound that could equal 'Precious Lord'; he wrote it when he was

discouraged and his spirit was broken" St. Louis gospel pioneer Willie Mae Ford Smith averred (Broughton 1985, p. 50). That first Sunday, however, the haptic power of the sound of *Nettie's* brokenness—indeed, her *breaking*—in her life's last retiring moans comingled indistinguishably with the blurred groans of one bearing life in expectant labor, all but escaped Dorsey. The shouting feeling *Precious Lord* stirred, especially in black women (who just "shout more frequently than men," as Zora Neale Hurston first pointed out) answered to a hearing from beyond the inclusive, undivided beyond of song and audition (Hurston 1981, p. 92). It was a hearing of (a call to) feeling that could not, in the final analysis, be other than the beyond of (i.e., that *is*) hapticality.

> Hapticality, the capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you . . . To feel others is unmediated, immediately social, amongst us, our thing, and even when we recompose religion, it comes from us, and even when we recompose race, we do it as race women and men . . . [T]hough refused sentiment, history and home, we feel (for) each other. (Harney and Moten 2013, p. 98)

Even if Frye was the featured soloist that haptic Sunday morning and Dorsey was down front, equally visible, accompanying him, their collaboration was, in any case, *Nettie's* song. And this, in two senses. Not only do I mean to underline *Precious Lord* as a requiem to Dorsey's personal loss—a song written in Nettie's memory, that is, and thus, from this vantage point, *her* song—but I mean also to posit perhaps gospel's greatest hit as a ballad conceived *by* Nettie's memory (that immaterial materiality of "overflowing excessive nothingness," recall, irrupting musically on Dorsey's mourning) and *heard*, as it were, *in Nettie's voice*, which is to say, heard by not a few shouting black women feeling one another feeling her as though somehow feeling *Nettie* singing, praying, feeling *them* in the travailing tones and testimony of *Precious Lord*. Recomposing Dorsey's broken spirit as their own, as another, hidden class of race women, to go along with Harney and Moten, they reconstitute race within the modern liberal project of American Protestantism, broadly speaking, as to both particularize a hermeneutics of African American religious faith, already ages old, and 'color' the prior conditions of modern gospel's possibility black in sound and womanist in sensibility.

All of this (not to put too fine a point to it) is to argue in the final analysis for a black feminist interpretation of the early history of modern gospel, one that backgrounds Thomas Dorsey, "the father" of the form, to Nettie Dorsey, the form's ghostly "mother." Seen this way, and following a course already suggestively charted by Jerma A. Jackson in *Singing in My Soul: Black Gospel Music in the Secular Age*, one not only comes to discern more clearly how, in Jackson's words, "women became important innovators in solo gospel," especially, "help[ing] shape the contours of gospel's solo tradition" in the modern era, but one comes to appreciate moreover how Nettie Dorsey's unanticipated (and yet nearly predictable) death—which is to say how the elegiac narrativization of her parturient passing (and that of Thomas Jr. mere hours later)—gave new birth, mother and child, to black religious music according to a vaguely Marian conceit (Jackson 2004, p. 4). As *Precious Lord* set about "restag[ing] death and rehears[ing] mo(ur)nin(g)," to steal a phrase from Moten about the similar work of Emmet Till's awful post-mortem appearance in photographic form (Moten 2003, p. 196), the song's first hearing could not help but have called up the visual poignancy of the young mother and neonate, like Madonna and child, lying together, placid and still, in the same softly billowing, lace-laden casket for all who attended the funeral at Pilgrim Baptist Church days earlier to witness (Figure 2). Against the shining maternity of the *Theotokos* ("bearer of God") in traditional Marian iconography (Figure 3), however, an unremitting mother-loss, brooding and funerary, "haunts" *Precious Lord* in a very specific way.

Figure 2. Nettie H. Dorsey and Thomas Dorsey Jr. still from *Say Amen Somebody* (1982).

Figure 3. Tintoretto, "Madonna and Child" (c. 1570–1572), oil on canvas.

To avow that *Precious Lord* is haunted by mother-loss is to approach a meaning and state exceeding mere metaphor. This haunted condition, which Avery Gordon has so deftly and specifically given account of in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, refers to a "language and ... experiential modality," she writes, for apprehending how "abusive systems of power make themselves and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposed to be over and done with" (Gordan 2008, p. xvi). Put another way, "haunting" names "an animated state in which a repressed or

unresolved social violence [makes] itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely" (Gordan 2008, p. xvi). Though it is *as if* it was Nettie singing that must have inspired so many women to shouting on hearing *Precious Lord*; it is not Nettie in herself so much as the racial circumstances of Nettie's bizarre dying, far from the help of an overfull hospital, that are haunting and trouble that song's singing with "feelings of loss, solitude, separation, indignation, poverty and illness" familiar to shouting black women in the age of Jim Crow (Marovich 2015, p. 105).

Inasmuch as the specific haunting Gordon theorizes "what's been concealed [as] very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us," then it is an insufferability toward the unspoken ongoingness of indifference to black maternal and infant mortality over time, it seems, that *Precious Lord*'s haunting is against (Gordan 2008, p. xvi). Which is to say, not altogether differently, that within, between and around its worried lines (*Precious Lord* "cries out to be sung with all the dramatic phrasing and curlicues that characterize the emotive gospel performance," one writer proclaimed) (Broughton 1985, p. 50), a tenacious grief obtains, resounding from the rafters in mother-loss, by which language, it should be clear now, I mean to evoke both the loss of black mothers to death in parturition and black mothers' experience of loss *as* mothers of sons and daughters, born and not-yet-born, to the already-ready hand of black death so proximate to black life.[7] It hardly surprises, then, that the first disciples of modern gospel were all women: Sallie Martin, Roberta Martin, Willie Mae Ford Smith, and Mahalia Jackson. Not coincidentally were women singers "the first into the field," as Broughton puts it, carrying the social gospel that is intrinsic to the gospel sound in the blues-dark grain of their voices (Broughton 1985, p. 50).

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[7] On the proximateness of black death to black life, see especially Christina Sharpe (Sharpe 2016).

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Article

Rewriting Race, Gender and Religion in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise*

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Abstract: This article explores author Toni Morrison's creation of female spiritual leaders in her 1977 novel, *Song of Solomon*, and her 1998 novel, *Paradise*. I argue that she deliberately distorts Biblical imagery and narrative to rewrite women into the roles of spiritual agents rather than subjects, using irony and inversion, in *Song of Solomon*. She builds on this in *Paradise* by exploring the limitations of patriarchal orthodox Christian systems of social order and control by casting them in light of alternative spiritual beliefs, most notably Gnosticism.

Keywords: religion; Gnosticism; womanist theology; African American women; spirituality; Toni Morrison; *Song of Solomon*; *Paradise*; *The Source of Self-Regard*

Toni Morrison has long been occupied with the ways in which religious beliefs inform African American lives. She explained to Thomas Le Clair in a 1981 interview her motivations in writing *Song of Solomon:* "I used the biblical names to show the impact of the Bible on the lives of black people, their awe of and respect for it, coupled with their ability to distort it for their own purposes" (Morrison and Taylor-Guthrie 1994, p. 126). Fifteen years later, when discussing the challenges of writing *Paradise* in her 1996 essay, "God's Language," she asserted that religion was so central to African American culture that a "history that narrows or dismisses religion in both their collective and individual life, in their political and aesthetic activity, is more than incomplete—it may be fraudulent" (Morrison 2019, p. 248). But trying to convey to postmodern readers the significance of such a faith to black communities proved challenging. First, the writer, according to Morrison, must figure out how to "render religious language credibly and effectively in postmodern fiction without having to submit to a vague egalitarianism, or to a kind of late-twentieth-century environmental spiritualism, or to the modernist/feminist school of the goddess-body adored, or to a loose, undiscriminating conviction of the innate divinity of all living things, or to the biblical/political scholasticism of the more entrenched and dictatorial wings of contemporary religious institutions" (Morrison 2019, pp. 248–49). Second, the writer must also determine how to "narrate persuasively profound and motivating faith in and to a highly secularized, contemporary, 'scientific' world" (Morrison 2019, p. 249).

She takes up these challenges explicitly, first in her novel *Song of Solomon*, published in 1977, and again in *Paradise*, published twenty years later in 1997. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison deliberately employs biblical language, imagery and allusion to subvert the gender- and race-based oppression that the Bible itself sanctions. I argue that Morrison uses irony, inversion and revision to manipulate female biblical stories and names in the novel, within the thematic context of the biblical "Song of Solomon," to redefine the relationship between gender, race and religion that emerged out of slavery.

In so doing, Morrison might be considered as anticipating the womanist theology and ethics that emerged in the 1980s. "Womanist," as a predominantly secular concept and term, was initially coined by writer Alice Walker in 1979 in her short story, "Coming Apart," and then later developed further in her 1983 collection, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Walker defined a "womanist" as a "black feminist or feminist of color" who is "responsible," "in charge" and "serious"; who "appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility ... and women's strength"; and who

loves, among other things, "the Spirit," "struggle," "the Folk," "herself. Regardless," as well as all others, universally.[1] While Walker's definition was predominantly secular, black female scholars of religion applied and broadened the concept to develop "womanist theology" as a corrective to the limitations of traditional white feminist and black theological frames. In 1987, Delores S. Williams, in "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices," defined womanist theology as a method grounded in a "multidialogical, liturgical, didactic" exploration of the "validity of female imagery and metaphorical language in constructing theological statements."[2] The next year, scholar-activist Katie Geneva Cannon established, in *Black Womanist Ethics* (1988), the concept of "womanism" as an analytical rubric through which to explain and expose the systemic oppression experienced by black women in particular, and black people more generally. By 1989, a pivotal "Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethic and Theology in Womanist Perspective" solidified womanist theology and ethics as central to African American, diaspora and religious studies. In this exchange, a stellar cohort of theologians and theorists consisting of Cheryl J. Sanders, Katie Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, M. Shawn Copeland, bell hooks, and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes further teased out the nuances of womanist theology to concretize it as an inclusive, justice-driven, love-based epistemology and ethics that foregrounds black women's commitments to standing against all forms of oppression to achieve communal wholeness and societal transformation.[3]

Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, published in 1977, predates this discussion, of course, though it embodies many of these same principles. Since Morrison does not refer to "womanism" or "womanist theology" herself when reflecting on her exploration of religion in her writings, I am reluctant to ascribe to her an intentional engagement in debates surrounding the definitions and purposes of a womanist theological or ethical epistemology. But I do consider convergences of the ideas in *Song of Solomon* and those of womanist theorists during the late 1970s and early 1980s to be products of a shared cultural milieu in which significant, often similar but not derivative, modes of cultural analysis and reasoning emerged. *Song of Solomon* both contributes to and reflects the cultural milieu from which womanist theology emerged as it challenges the stories the Bible tells African Americans generally and African American women, in particular. In the novel, Morrison crafts a complicated frame of Biblical names through which to create a new sacred text that places black female spiritual guides at the center of the male protagonist's figurative death and resurrection.

In *Paradise*, written twenty years later, the power and position of women as spiritual and ethical leaders also remains central. In this novel, however, Morrison pivots from using irony, inversion and revision to critique Biblical racism and misogyny and grounds herself instead in Gnostic ideas that emphasize female divinity and ways of "knowing," or *gnosis*, as correctives to the patriarchal hegemony and doctrine that was coming to define an emerging Orthodox Christianity. She describes herself, when writing *Paradise*, as trying to "write a religion-inflected prose narrative that [did] not rest its case entirely or mainly on biblical language" because she wanted to "make the experience and journey of faith fresh, as new and as linguistically unencumbered as it was to early believers, who themselves had no collection of books to rely on" (Morrison 2019, p. 253). In other words, in *Paradise*, she sought to create an opportunity for readers to witness the spiritual transcendence and even ecstasy experienced by Christ's early followers. The outcome of the two approaches Morrison takes in *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise* might be considered a "gospel of Toni" that preaches a womanist-inflected, spiritual and ethical way of being that exposes and critiques the misogyny undergirding orthodox Christianity and offers female spiritual leaders, grounded in mercy, communal wholeness, and love, as salvific alternatives.

1 (Walker 1983, pp. xi–xii).
2 (Williams 1987), as cited by (Kirk-Duggan 2014, p. 2).
3 For a comprehensive overview of the origins and history of womanist theology, see (Kirk-Duggan 2014).

Song of Solomon

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison casts biblically named women as the spiritual guides of the protagonist, Milkman Dead, to emphasize how black women, so rarely portrayed in the Bible, play pivotal roles in Milkman's formation and eventual salvation. Morrison comments on the importance of women's influence on Milkman in a 1983 interview with Nellie McKay:

> I chose the man to make that journey because I thought he had more to learn than a woman would have. I started with a man, and I was amazed at how little men taught one another in the book. I assumed that all men ever learn about being men they get from other men. So that the presence of Pilate, and the impact that all the other women had on Milkman's life, came as a bit of a surprise to me. But it made it work out right, because there were two sets of information he needed to learn in order to become a complete human being. (Morrison and Taylor-Guthrie 1994, p. 154)

The two sets of information she refers to are gendered: Milkman can achieve balance and wholeness only by embodying what Morrison attributes to Pilate, "the best of that which is female and the best of that which is male" (Evans 1984, p. 344).

In order to give her female characters this power and influence, Morrison herself had to "distort" their biblical stories to make them meaningful in the context of Milkman's development. Through irony, inversion and revision, Morrison adapts the biblical stories associated with Rebecca, Hagar, Mary Magdalene, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Ruth and Pontius Pilate to expose simultaneously the sexism at the base of these biblical tales, as well as the inherent chauvinism of Milkman himself.

The characters Reba and Hagar, for instance, challenge both the Bible's and Milkman's notions of women as property. Playing on the story of Rebecca in the Old Testament, Morrison creates in Reba a character who wishes, to a radical degree, neither to possess nor to be possessed. While the biblical Rebecca was a virgin chosen by Abraham, the patriarch of Israel, to marry his son, Isaac, and maintain the family line, Morrison's Reba is the opposite: she is unabashedly no virgin, refuses to marry, and gives birth to a daughter who, as female and childless herself, preserves neither the maternal nor paternal family line. Unlike the biblical Rebecca who had no power outside the structures of marriage and motherhood and who was, indeed, defined as the property of first her husband and then her chosen son, Morrison's Reba is both untethered to a man and financially free (largely because she has no interest in money or owning anything). She gives away everything she ever owned, in fact, except for the diamond ring she won from Sears—a symbol that actually proves her autonomy rather than her dependence on a man.

Through Hagar, Reba's daughter, Morrison shows the perils of allowing oneself to be "owned" emotionally by another, as she again plays upon the themes of Hagar's story in the Bible. The biblical Hagar is an Egyptian slave of Sarah, the wife of Abraham. Because Sarah cannot bear children, she bids her husband to conceive a child, Ishmael, with the enslaved Hagar in order to carry on the family line and elevate Sarah's own standing from a barren woman to one with a child. Custom dictated that any child conceived by Abraham, with Sarah or a concubine, would be considered Sarah's and Abraham's. After Sarah unexpectedly conceives and gives birth to Isaac, however, she demands that Abraham banish Hagar and Ishmael to the desert to ensure that her own biological son is the sole heir to his father's fortune and property.

In Hagar's story in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison reiterates but twists the themes, subjects and agents of servitude, sexual exploitation and banishment that are found in Genesis. In her chapter, "A Mistress, A Maid, and No Mercy," minister Renita Weems argues that,

> for black women, the story of Hagar in the Old Testament book of Genesis is a haunting one. It is a story of exploitation and persecution suffered by an Egyptian slave woman at the hands of her Hebrew mistress. Even if it's not our individual story, it's a story we've read in our mother's eyes ... after a hard day of work as a domestic. And if it is not our mothers'

> story, then it is certainly most of our grandmother's story. For black women, Hagar's story is peculiarly familiar. It's as if we know it by heart."[4]

While Weems expresses the resonance Hagar's narrative holds for black women generally, Morrison sharpens her commentary on oppression by making not a woman (Sarah) the agent of Hagar's misery, but rather by ascribing that role to Milkman, Hagar's own kin/cousin/lover.

When the two met, Milkman saw Hagar as his equal: "she was as strong and as muscular as he was" (Morrison [1977] 1987, p. 45). He fell in love with her and for twelve years enjoyed their sexual liaisons, but eventually he came to regard her as "the third beer. Not the first one, which the throat receives with almost tearful gratitude; nor the second, that confirms and extends the pleasure of the first. But the third, the one you drink because it's there, because it can't hurt, and because what difference does it make?" (Morrison [1977] 1987, pp. 92, 91). The biblical Hagar is a subject of jealous rivalry but Morrison's Hagar, as "not a real or legitimate girlfriend—not someone he might marry," was never fought over by "the various women [Milkman] dated 'seriously'" (Morrison [1977] 1987, p. 91). The biblical Hagar is initially welcomed as her husband's concubine but then shunned by her owner/"sister" Sarah, and Morrison's Hagar is initially welcomed as Milkman's concubine but then shunned by him, her "brother, cousin," as Pilate significantly refers to him. Moreover, when ending their relationship, Milkman treats Hagar like his prostitute or servant. He gives Hagar "a nice piece of money ... " and a note thanking her for her years of service. "'Also, I want to thank you. Thank you for all you have meant to me. For making me happy all these years. I am signing this letter with love, of course, but more than that, with gratitude'" (pp. 43, 98, 99). By casting Milkman as Hagar's executioner (she eventually dies of despair), Morrison charges black men as complicit in the same dishonoring of their sisters/cousins/lovers that is perpetrated by the biblical Sarah and Abraham. The biblical story of Hagar is one of servitude, subjugation and exile grounded in racism and sexism. Morrison's story of Hagar signifies on these themes by portraying how the willingness to use and abuse another is not limited by race, time or place.[5]

Through Magdalene called Lena and First Corinthians, Morrison critiques biblical admonitions against female empowerment and sexuality. The figure of Mary Magdalene in the Bible has been interpreted for centuries as a redeemed whore, a portrayal that many scholars claim reinforced and justified the secondary role to which women have historically been relegated in orthodox Christianity.[6] James Carroll summarizes this view:

> Beginning with the threads of [the] few statements in the earliest Christian records, dating to the first through third centuries, an elaborate tapestry was woven, leading to a portrait of St. Mary Magdalene in which the most consequential note—that she was a repentant prostitute—is almost certainly untrue. On that false note hangs the dual use to which her legend has been put ever since: discrediting sexuality in general and disempowering women in particular. [7]

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians also "discredits sexuality" and "disempowers women" by requiring, among other things, a denial of sexual pleasure outside of marriage (1 Corinthians 6:12–20 and 7:1–16), women's silence (1 Corinthians 14:34) and women's submissiveness (1 Corinthians 11:4). Morrison calls into question all of these principles by casting Lena as the agent, and First Corinthians as the embodiment of female voice, authority and sexuality.

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4 (Weems 2005, p. 1).

5 For a discussion about the ways in which violence toward black women in particular constitutes a unique form of social and personal sin, see womanist theologian Delores S. Williams (1995).

6 See K.L. (King 2003; Esther DeBoer 2004; Christopher Tuckett 2007; Brock 2003).

7 www.smithsonianmag.com/history/who-was-mary-magdalene-119565482/#FD4TecXcCKwrjv6G.99. This article helpfully teases out the references to numerous biblical women named Mary in an effort to come to a closer understanding of who, historically, Mary of Magdalene might have been.

Through Lena, Morrison challenges the passivity ascribed to Mary Magdalene in the Bible by casting her more along the lines of the Mary Magdalene presented in the gnostic gospels. Gnosticism is a modern term that refers to a variety of syncretic religious movements present during the first and second centuries AD. The "gnostic gospels," with which Morrison is obviously familiar given that she uses excerpts from them as epigraphs to both *Jazz* (1992) and *Paradise* (1997), were revealed upon the discovery of what has become known as the Nag Hammadi Library, a set of ancient texts found buried in an earthen jar in Egypt in 1945. These are attributed to figures other than the authors of the four gospels that have been canonized, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and many challenge the accepted narrative of male authority found in the New Testament. For example, the gnostic Mary Magdalene is not a prostitute but rather is singled out by Jesus for special teaching, portrayed as his most cherished disciple and the "apostle of the apostles," and considered by some, as scholar Karen King recently documented with a Coptic papyrus, to be Jesus' wife (King 2014). The *Gospel of Philip* describes Mary Magdalene as

> ... the companion of the [Savior] ... [Christ loved] her more than [all] the disciples, and used to kiss her [often] on her [mouth]. The rest of [the disciples were offended] ... They said to him, "Why do you love her more than all of us?" The Savior answered and said to them, "Why do I not love you as (I love) her?". (Pagels 1979, p. xv)

While both the biblical and gnostic Magdalenes are present at the crucifixion and the resurrection, the biblical Mary Magdalene is described as a lowly woman to whom Christ first manifests himself, whereas the gnostic Mary Magdalene is depicted as Christ's chosen spokesperson to announce his rebirth and to tell Peter and the other apostles about his command to them to preach the gospel. Morrison's Lena recalls the empowered position of the gnostic Mary Magdalene, particularly in the culminating scene of Part One of the novel in which Lena claims her voice and asserts her gendered authority to her brother.

Morrison begins Lena's speech by referencing directly the false virgin–whore dichotomy that has defined Jesus' mother, Mary, and the biblical Mary Magdalene for centuries. In reference to her father, Lena states, "First he displayed us, then he splayed us. All our lives were like that: he would parade us like virgins through Babylon, then humiliate us like whores in Babylon" (Morrison [1977] 1987, p. 216). Next, Morrison evokes the confrontation between Mary Magdalene and Peter after Christ's resurrection. In the biblical scene, Peter questions Mary Magdalene's legitimacy, as a woman, to serve as Christ's messenger. Just as the gnostic Mary Magdalene challenged Peter's claims to a superiority based solely on his gender, Morrison portrays Magdalene, called Lena, as similarly calling Milkman to task.[8]

> "Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you ... And to this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee. You've never picked up anything heavier than you own feet, or solved a problem harder than fourth-grade arithmetic. Where do you get the *right* to decide our lives? ... I'll tell you where. From that hog's cut that hangs down between your legs". (p. 215)

Lena further calls out Milkman's motives for hitting his father, Macon, in alleged defense of his mother, Ruth: "You think because you hit him once that we all believe you were protecting her. Taking her side. It's a lie. You were taking over, letting us know you had the right to tell her and all of us what do to" (pp. 215–16). But Morrison refuses Milkman, and by implication all men, this presumed but unearned authority grounded solely in their gender. By casting Lena as the authoritative gospel preacher who sends Milkman on his journey toward salvation, and by evoking Peter's and Mary's confrontation, Morrison rejects the silent and subservient position to which women are relegated in the Bible.

[8] The confrontation between Peter and Mary Magdalene is also depicted in the gnostic texts, *The Gospel of Thomas*, *Pistis Sophia*, and *The Gospel of the Egyptians*.

Through the character of First Corinthians, Morrison challenges Paul's teachings on sexuality. First Corinthians is an unemployed, paternally dependent, virginal woman who lives in the sterile home of her father. She is saved from this by Porter, a lower-class "Southside" man whom the Dead family deemed unworthy of her. After all, "she was First Corinthians Dead, daughter of a wealthy property owner and the elegant Ruth Foster, granddaughter of the magnificent and worshipped Dr. Foster" (Morrison [1977] 1987, pp. 197–98). Porter and Corinthians keep their affair a secret because the 40-year-old woman is afraid to reveal it to the patriarchs of the family, her father and brother. Consequently, Porter decides to end the relationship but

> ... in a panic, lest he shift gears and drive away, leaving her alone in the street, Corinthians climbed up on the fender and lay full out across the hood of the car. She didn't look through the windshield at him. She just lay there, stretched across the car, her fingers struggling for a grip on the steel. She thought of nothing. Nothing except what her body needed to do to hang on, to never let go. Even if he drove off at one hundred miles an hour, she would hang on. (Morrison [1977] 1987, p. 199)

Porter relieves Corinthians from her metaphorical "cross" on the car and the two finally consummate their love in the tiny room he rents from her father. Morrison goes so far as to imply that Corinthians has been symbolically reborn as a result: "standing there, barefoot, her hair damp with sweat and sticking to her cheeks like paint, she felt easy. In place of vanity she now felt a self-esteem that was quite new" (p. 201). This rendering of a figurative crucifixion and rebirth implies that Morrison suggests that life is found in the union of the body and the soul, in contrast to Paul's dualist contentions that the spiritual is more important than the physical and that sexuality outside marriage is sinful.[9]

Finally, Morrison distorts the Book of Ruth's themes of female love and devotion to subvert biblical patrilineality by linking Pilate to both Naomi and the goel, Boaz, in Ruth's biblical tale. By virtue of Levirite laws, the biblical Ruth's son, Obed, is considered also to be Naomi's, and so, too, does Ruth Foster Dead consider Pilate to be Milkman's other mother. Ruth explains to Milkman that, when Macon insisted that she abort their baby, "Pilate helped me stand him off. I wouldn't have been strong enough without her. She saved my life. And yours, Macon. She saved yours too. She watched you like you were her own" (pp. 125–26). Pilate subsequently watches over Milkman's crib until Macon banishes her from the household. Later, Pilate rescues Milkman from jail and, most importantly, serves as his spiritual guide on his journey toward balance.[10]

But more subversive than Pilate's sharing Ruth's role as mother is Morrison's portrayal of her supplanting the paternal role of Macon as well. Deuteronomy 25:5–6 describes the role of the goel: "when brothers live on the same property and one of them dies without a son, the wife of the dead man may not marry a stranger outside the family. Her brother-in-law is to take her as his wife, have sexual relations with her, and perform the duty of a brother-in-law for her. The first son she bears will carry on the name of the dead brother, so his name will not be blotted out from Israel" (*Christian Standard Bible*). This does, of course, ensure that women and women's bodies remain in control of men, further solidifying patriarchal privilege. But again, Morrison turns this on its head. In *Song of Solomon*, Macon has no male kin, only his sister, Pilate. Though not dead literally, Macon's name is Dead and his relationship with his wife is dead as well. Morrison alludes to the Jewish law of the goel but feminizes it by casting Pilate in the role. By coercing her figuratively dead brother, through conjure, to have sex with Ruth against his will, she acts symbolically as Milkman's progenitor. "You'll get pregnant ... He ought to have a son. Otherwise this be the end of us" (p. 125). Through Pilate's intervention, Milkman is born to carry on the family name.

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[9] See womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas' *Sexuality and the Black Church* (Orbis, 1999) for a view of sexuality as God's gift to an embodied humanity/divinity that allows for healing, loving and life-sustaining relationships.

[10] Perhaps Ruth's maiden name of Foster is intended to signal her role as "foster" mother in relation to Pilate's more influential presence.

Moreover, the definition of goel is "redeemer" and, not surprisingly, Morrison depicts Pilate as the one who ultimately leads the way for Milkman's redemption. Playing on Christ's crucifixion by Pontius Pilate on the cross, which is often referred to as a tree in the Bible, Morrison imbues Pilate with qualities symbolizing a tree of life, not death.[11] According to Debra Walker King, Morrison fictionalized a tradition practiced in Morrison's own family when she portrays Pilate's illiterate father selecting his daughter's name blindly from the Bible (D.W. King 1998, p. 87).[13] Jake is described as seeing "a group of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome." He saw in them "a large figure that looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective row of smaller trees" and so he chose the name, "Pilate," for his baby girl (p. 118). Whereas Pontius Pilate sent alleged miscreants to be crucified on a "tree," Morrison portrays Pilate Dead as providing the tree-like shelter to her family that her father initially saw in the letters shaping her name. She further emphasizes this association by depicting Pilate's house as surrounded by "four huge pine trees," the needles of which Pilate chewed and with which she stuffed her mattress, causing her brother Macon to remember her as always "smelling like a forest" (p. 27). Morrison describes Pilate as, when cooking, "sway[ing] like a willow over her stirring" (p. 30). She invests Milkman with the thought that Pilate looked "like a tall black tree" when he first meets her (p. 39). Finally, Morrison transforms Pilate, when she is attempting to save Hagar from death, into a "divi-divi tree beaten forward by a wind always blowing from the same direction. Like the tree, [Pilate] offered [Hagar] all [she] had: love murmurs and a protective shade" (p. 315). By naming Pilate after Christ's crucifier but imbuing her with living arboreal qualities, Morrison symbolically and semiotically subverts the association of Pilate Dead with Pontius Pilate's crucifixion of Christ on a tree/cross.

In fact, Morrison casts Pilate as Christ-like herself and, in so doing, offers a final rewriting of biblical racial and gender hierarchies. The savior of this novel is a black female ancestor whose very presence preserves the past, maintains the present, and promises a future. According to Morrison, African American fiction is distinguished from other types of writing because "there is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (Evans 1984, p. 343). An essential element of Pilate's wisdom lay in her understanding of the need for balance: between male and female influence and authority, between love and hate, between the vengeance of the Seven Days and the redemption invited by mercy, between Old Testament and New Testament forms of justice. Morrison argues that, if "that balance is disturbed, if it is not nurtured, and if it is not counted on and if it is not reproduced . . . we are, in fact, lost" (Evans 1984, p. 344). Though Pilate is killed at the end of the novel, she has already saved Milkman by passing on her wisdom, by nurturing in him an awareness of the need for "balance" (note that when Milkman finally understands his family story he no longer limps, symbolizing his own newly found balance), thus ensuring that the knowledge of the ancestor has been "reproduced," not "lost."[12]

While Morrison rewrites black women into the central roles of spiritual guides, gospel preacher, and savior in *Song of Solomon*, she draws upon another paradigm for women in relation to Christianity in *Paradise*. To critique the patriarchal structure of orthodox Christianity, Morrison creates a female leader in Consolata (Connie) through whose guidance the women at the convent, some women in the town of Ruby, and even one of the town's patriarchs come to a knowledge of the divine within themselves and, as such, of a spiritual divinity as well. But showing the depth of these experiences required that Morrison *not* use biblical references in *Paradise*. In *Paradise*, simply "layer[ing] religiosity onto an existing canvas of migration and the quest for citizenship, or . . . tip[ping] one's hat to characters whose belief is unshakable" was insufficient, in her mind (Morrison 2019, p. 248).

[11] https://forwhatsaiththescriptures.org/2015/04/26/jesus-hanged-on-a-tree/.

[12] Of course, one could also interpret Pilate's death at Guitar's hands as symbolic of Christ as well in that she died so that Milkman might live. This reading depends on how the final scene of the novel is interpreted: does Milkman literally die "in the killing arms of his brother" or does, "in surrendering to" and "riding the air," does he become transcendent?

> The novel's time frame, from 1908 to 1976, and the history of its population, former and children of former slaves, require me to rely heavily on the characters' reserves of faith, their concept of freedom, their perception of the divine, and their imaginative as well as organizational/administrative prowess. For like many, but not all, deliberately, carefully constructed nineteenth-century communities, a deeply held and wholly shared belief system was much more vital to the enterprise than was physical endurance, leadership, and opportunity . . . . Therefore, among the difficulties before me is the daunting one of showing not just how their civic and economic impulses respond to their religious principles but how their everyday lives were inextricably bound with those principles. (Morrison 2019, p. 248)

In this novel, she needed, in her words, "to construct a work in which religious belief is central to the narrative itself" (Morrison 2019, p. 248).

To do so, she creates the town of Ruby as emblematic of a patriarchal, orthodox Christianity and the Convent as its antithesis. Ruby is led by the male Morgan twins, significantly name Steward and Deacon, and populated by several other god-fearing men and their families. This group, along with their predecessors, have fled racism, colorism and general persecution to create a "paradise" on earth. Here, deference to God's authority is typified in the statement on the Oven—an artifact that historically served as the center of the community—"Beware the Furrow of His Brow." In Ruby, the streets are named after the canonized gospel writers, St. Mark, St. Matthew, St. Luke and St. John. Not surprisingly, given the confrontation between Peter and Mary Magdalene about who had rightful authority to announce Christ's call to preach the gospel, "when a fifth street was needed, it was named St. Peter" (Morrison 1998, p. 114). Ruby, according to Morrison, "is all about its race" and its history: "preserving it, developing powerful myths of origin, and maintaining its purity" (Morrison 2019, p. 274). Life itself, not just religion, is classified into good and evil, insider and outsider, conformist and noncomformist, male and female, and friend and foe.

Ruby's opposite can be found in the community of women who live seventeen miles outside of town in "the Convent." They are a family defined not by bloodlines but by choice. Belonging is not predicated on shared history or ideology but by the women's common experiences of being expelled or escaping from somewhere else. In contrast to the order and religious principles that pervade Ruby's economic, civic and daily life, the Convent is characterized by a clashing of the sacred and profane: the building was once "an embezzler's folly. A mansion where bisque and rose-tone marble floors segue into teak ones. Isinglass holds yesterday's light and patterns walls that were stripped and whitewashed" when it was taken over by Catholic nuns to create an Indian Boarding School (Morrison 1998, p. 4). Statues of saints stand alongside naked cherubs engaging in bacchanalia and brass mermaids holding up bathtubs with their upturned, lush bosoms. Finally, whereas Ruby is focused on preserving its history, the women in the Convent strive to make meaning of traumatic pasts in the present in order to create free futures for themselves.

Morrison explains that she set up "an all black community, chosen by its inhabitants, next to a raceless one, also chosen by its inhabitants" to shift the focus from "traditional black/white hostilities" to "the nature of exclusion, the origins of chauvinism, the sources of oppression, assault, and slaughter" (Morrison 2019, pp. 273–74). The entire book is a meditation on these conflicts from multiple angles, with gender, generation, values, ethics, and personal identity, among them. At stake, according to Morrison, is the "struggle over history"—the same battle, I argue, engaged in by the world of early Christianity. "Who will tell and therefore control the story of the past?" she asks. "Who will shape the future? . . . What is manhood? Womanhood? And finally, most importantly, what is personhood?" (Morrison 2019, p. 274). To this, I will add, who is given the authority to decide?

To explore these questions, Morrison compares the orthodox Christian practices and beliefs in the town of Ruby to a variety of alternate spiritual beliefs, many of which are grounded in *gnosis*. Gnosticism generally holds that the answers to these questions come from the self. At the foundation of these beliefs is *gnosis*, or "knowledge." Scholar (and Morrison's close colleague at Princeton) Elaine Pagels explains,

> For as those who claim to know nothing about ultimate reality are called agnostic (literally, "not knowing"), the person who does claim to know such things is called gnostic ("knowing"). But *gnosis* is not primarily rational knowledge. The Greek language distinguishes between scientific or reflective knowledge ("He knows mathematics") and knowing through observation or experience ("He knows me"), which is *gnosis*. As the gnostics use the term, we could translate it as "insight," for *gnosis* involves an intuitive process of knowing oneself. And to know oneself, they claimed, . . . at the deepest level is simultaneously to know God. (Pagels 1979, p. xix)

The gnostic teacher, Monoimus, directed followers, in fact, to "abandon the search for God . . . Look for him by taking yourself as the starting point. Learn who it is within you who makes everything his own and says, 'My God, my mind, my thought, my soul, my body.' Learn the sources of sorrow, joy, love hate . . . If you carefully investigate these matters, you will find him *in yourself*" (Pagels 1979, pp. xix–xx). Though allusions to Gnosticism seem to pervade the novel, three events, in particular, seem intentionally modeled on gnostic beliefs.

The first involves Consolata bringing Scout (not his brother, "Easter," oddly enough) back to life after a car accident. Consolata, having been adopted and raised by nuns, is a firm follower of Catholic doctrine but her friend, Lone DuPres, who is also an outsider to the town of Ruby, is open to "practicing," which Consolata finds heretical. Lone tries to help her see that "faith" and "practicing" are not antithetical to one another.

> Lone didn't visit often, but when she did she gave Consolata information that made her uneasy. Consolata complained that she did not believe in magic; that the church and everything holy forbade its claims to *knowingness* [my emphasis] and its practice. Lone wasn't aggressive. She simply said, "Sometimes folks need more."
>
> "Never," said Consolata. "In my faith, faith is all I need."
>
> "You need what we all need: earth, air, water. Don't separate God from His elements. He created it all. You stuck on dividing Him from His works. Don't unbalance his world." (Morrison 1998, p. 244)

Morrison's direct reference to "knowingness" seems intentionally to allude to Gnosticism. Lone becomes the "lone" voice who is able to urge Connie to embrace beliefs wider than those to which Catholic orthodoxy has limited her and to "practice" to save another's life.

Connie resists this thinking until Soane and Deacon's son is near death in a car crash. In response to Lone's plea to "go inside him. Wake him up . . . Step in. Just step on in. Help him, girl!" Consolata "looked at the body and without hesitation removed her glasses and focused on the trickles of red discoloring his hair."

> She stepped in. Saw the stretch of road he had dreamed through, felt the flip of the truck, the headache, the chest pressure, the unwillingness to breathe . . . Inside the boy she saw a pinpoint of light receding. Pulling up energy that felt like fear, she stared at it until it widened. Then more, more so air could come seeping, at first, then rushing, rushing in. Although it hurt like the devil to look at it, she concentrated as though the lungs in need were her own. Scout opened his eyes, groaned and sat up. (p. 245)

Morrison's description of this scene calls forth the gnostic belief that "each of us has a spark of divinity within, which can be fanned into a fire through which we can each partake of the nature of the true and highest God" (Smith 2009, p. ix). She goes so far as to name it "in sight," if not *gnosis*, when she describes how Connie found a way to reconcile herself to it that would neither "offend Him or place her soul in peril."

> It was a question of language. Lone called it 'stepping in.' Consolata said it was 'seeing in.' Thus the gift was 'in sight.' Something God made free to anyone who wanted to develop it.

> It was devious but it settled the argument between herself and Lone and made it possible to accept Lone's remedies for all sorts of ills and to experiment with others while the "in sight" blazed away. The dimmer the visible world, the more dazzling her "in sight" became. (Morrison 1998, p. 247)

By investing Connie with the ability to call forth the "spark of divinity" within Scout (and, later, Mary Magna as well), to "fan it into a fire" and save his life, Morrison suggests Consolata is gifted with *gnosis* or "insight" that emerged from "an intuitive process of knowing" herself and her abilities.

Morrison follows this event with a second apparent allusion to gnostic beliefs in the ritual of cleansing and rebirth that the women undergo in the cellar. After a symbolic "last supper" and under the direction of a seemingly resurrected Consolata, the women follow Jesus' teaching in the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* in which he directs believers to "bring forth what is in you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you" (Pagels 1979, p. 126). To do so, Connie draws crime scene-like templates of each woman on the floor and the women then lie in them. Collectively, over a period of days, from these metaphorical coffins, they articulate their deepest wounds.

> That is how the loud dreaming began. How the stories rose in that place. Half-tales and the never-dreamed escaped from their lips to soar high above guttering candles, shifting dust from crates and bottles. And it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning. In spite of or because their bodies ache, they step easily into the dreamer's tale ... In loud dreaming, monologue is no different from a shriek; accusations directed to the dead and long gone are undone by murmurs of love ... Life, real and intense, shifted to down there in limited pools of light .... (Morrison 1998, pp. 264–65)

In the process, "with Consolata in charge, like a new and revised Reverend Mother, feeding them bloodless food and water alone to quench their thirst, they altered" (p. 265).

"In bringing forth what was within them," in learning the sources of their "joy, sorrow, love, hate" as directed by Monoimus, did the women experience death and resurrection? Whereas orthodox Christianity insisted that "the apostles alone held definitive religious authority, and that their only legitimate heirs are priests and bishops who trace their ordination back to that same apostolic succession," gnostic Christians rejected this, based largely on a central difference in how the two groups interpreted Christ's resurrection. Orthodox Christians believed Christ was literally resurrected, in the flesh, and then ascended to heaven. Only those apostles who physically encountered him in his resurrected state were allowed to preach his teachings. As Pagels explains, "[e]ven today the pope traces his—and the primacy he claims over the rest—to Peter himself, 'first of the apostles,' since he was 'first witness to the resurrection'" (Pagels 1979, p. 11).

Gnostic Christians, on the other hand, in addition to asserting that a woman, Mary Magdalene, was Christ's chosen apostle and the first to witness the resurrection, also believed the resurrection to be symbolic. They did not see it as a unique event that took place in the past and was witnessed only by a chosen few; instead, they saw it as symbolizing how Christ's presence could be experienced by anyone, at any time. The difference between understanding Christ's resurrection literally or symbolically gets to the heart of Morrison's self-described goals, when writing *Paradise*, to examine "the nature of exclusion, the origins of chauvinism, the sources of oppression, assault, and slaughter (Morrison 2019, pp. 273–74). A literal interpretation is inherently exclusive in that it ensures that all religious "authority derives from certain apostles' experience of the resurrected Christ," thus paving the way for a patriarchal, "apostolic" church governance (Pagels 1979, p. 10). A spiritual interpretation is inherently inclusive in that the possibility of spiritual rebirth is open to all. The author of the gnostic *Treatise on Resurrection* explains "that ordinary human existence is spiritual death. But the resurrection is the moment of enlightenment: 'It is ... the revealing of what truly exists ... and a migration (*metabolē* – change, transition) into newness'" (Pagels 1979, p. 12). Pagels explains that "gnostic accounts often mention how the recipients respond to Christ's presence with intense emotions—terror, awe, distress, joy,"

and that gnostic writers "respect—even revere—such experiences, through which spiritual intuition discloses insight into the nature of reality" (Pagels 1979, p. 12).

Morrison does not elaborate on what "altering" means in the context of the ritual in the cellar except to say that, following it, Soane was startled to notice "how calmly themselves they all seemed," how "the women were no longer haunted" (Morrison 1998, p. 266). Certainly, some type of rebirth seems to be the consequence of the "altering." Shortly after the completion of the template ritual, Morrison depicts the women as symbolically baptizing themselves in a rainfall.

> Gathered in the kitchen door, first they watched, then they stuck out their hands to feel. It was like lotion on their fingers so they entered it and let it pour like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces. Consolata started it; the rest were quick to join her. There are great rivers in the world and on their banks and the edges of oceans children thrill to water. In places where rain is light the thrill is almost erotic. But those sensations bow to the rapture of holy women dancing in hot sweet rain. (p. 283)

Bearing the shaved heads of female Buddhist monks, these are "holy women" who know themselves and, in so doing, have found the divine in themselves and one another.

Having set up Ruby to represent an orthodox Christian community that thought it was doing good by following the ways of the Bible, insulating itself from danger, and holding evil at bay, Morrison reveals the consequences of such thinking. She states that in the novel, she chose "not only to explore the idea of paradise, but to interrogate the narrow imagination that has conceived it" (Morrison 2019, p. 279). In *Paradise*, that narrow imagination belongs to the patriarchs of Ruby who cannot tolerate the feminine consecration of the women in the Convent, these "bodacious black Eves" whom they perceived to be "unredeemed by Mary" and filled with "female malice" (Morrison 1998, p. 18). "Before those heifers came to town," says one of them as they plan the massacre, "this was a peaceable kingdom. The others before them at least had some religion. These here sluts out there never step foot in a church and I bet you a dollar to a fat nickle they ain't thinking about one either. They don't need men and they don't need God" (Morrison 1998, p. 276). So, in a town whose men prided themselves about the fact that their women "were not prey," the male town leaders, headed by patriarchs Deacon and Steward, hunted down the Convent women and, with the "odor of righteousness" and "God at their side, ... t[ook] aim. For Ruby" (Morrison 1998, p. 18).

If Morrison begins *Paradise* with the certainty of murder—the very first line of the novel is "they shoot the white girl, first"—she closes the novel with the uncertainty of death, just as she did in *Song of Solomon*. In *Song of Solomon*, protagonist Milkman leaps off a cliff toward his "main man," Guitar, knowing full well that Guitar has been trying to kill him. But Morrison tells us that "it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother ... For now [Milkman] knew what [his ancestor] Shalimar knew: if you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it" (Morrison [1977] 1987, p. 337). Milkman's journey has led him to a place of self-knowledge, atonement, and rebirth. With the help of the female spiritual guides to lead him, by surrendering the power to control and possess, he achieves salvation. Morrison closes *Paradise* with similar ambiguity about what constitutes life and death: when Roger Best, the town's undertaker, goes to the Convent to retrieve the bodies of the slain women, he finds none. The final pages of the novel portray the women reuniting with the family members who wounded them, in acts of forgiveness, reconciliation and redemption. Are we to interpret these "resurrections" as literal or symbolic? Does it matter? In creating these ambiguities, Morrison importantly gives—or challenges—her readers with the authority to decide not only what is manhood, womanhood and personhood, as she describes in her essay, "The Trouble with Paradise," but also what defines virtue and vice, sacred and profane, justice and injustice, inclusive and exclusive, and life-giving and life-taking.

These two novels suggest that the "gospel of Toni" considers redemption as the outcome of engaging in the difficult and often painful processes of self-knowledge and self-forgiveness. It is a "gospel" that preaches inclusion, equality and communal wholeness as the goal and defines love and

mercy as the means by which to attain it. Through irony, inversion and revision of canonical biblical narratives and orthodox Christian histories that position men at the center of a patriarchal church, in *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise*, Morrison offers a womanist-inflected, spiritual and ethical alternative in which women, and black women in particular, act as a salvific force in a vindictive and vengeful world. That is quite a corrective gospel, indeed.

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Christianity's Last Stand: Visions of Spirituality in Post-1970 African American Women's Literature

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Abstract: Christianity appealed to writers of African descent from the moment they set foot on New World soil. That attraction, perhaps as a result of the professed mission of slaveholders to "Christianize the heathen African," held sway in African American letters well into the twentieth century. While African American male writers joined their female counterparts in expressing an attraction to Christianity, black women writers, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, consistently began to express doubts about the assumed altruistic nature of a religion that had been used as justification for enslaving their ancestors. Lorraine Hansberry's Beneatha Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) initiated a questioning mode in relation to Christianity that continues into the present day. It was especially after 1970 that black women writers turned their attention to other ways of knowing, other kinds of spirituality, other ways of being in the world. Consequently, they enable their characters to find divinity within themselves or within communities of extra-natural individuals of which they are a part, such as vampires. As this questioning and re-conceptualization of spirituality and divinity continue into the twenty-first century, African American women writers make it clear that their characters, in pushing against traditional renderings of religion and spirituality, envision worlds that their contemporary historical counterparts cannot begin to imagine.

Keywords: Christianity; spirituality; African American women writers; 1970; healing; extra-naturalism

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In her 1945 volume, *A Street in Bronzeville*, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks included a sixteen-line poem entitled "the preacher: ruminates behind the sermon," which contains the following lines:

> I think it must be lonely to be God.
> Nobody loves a master. No. Despite
> The bright hosannas, bright dear-Lords, and bright
> Determined reverence of Sunday eyes. . . .
>
> But who walks with Him?—dares to take His arm,
> To slap Him on the shoulder, tweak His ear,
> Buy Him a Coca-Cola or a beer,
> Poop-pooh His politics, call Him a fool?
>
> Perhaps—who knows—He tires of looking down. (Brooks 1963, p. 8)

The poem is striking in that it simultaneously looks backward and forward to how writers of African descent on United States soil depict Christianity in their works. On the one hand, Brooks is clearly conceptualizing the traditional Christian God—He who is omnipotent and deserves/expects worshipful adoration. On the other hand, Brooks reduces God to a human level by framing Him in the context of interactions that occur easily between individuals—walking, touching, slapping

on the shoulder, tweaking an ear, buying a beer, dismissing politics, and even daring to call Him a fool. In other words, Brooks has transformed God by personifying Him in human terms. She has thus reduced His power, snatched him out of his biblical role, and perhaps even called into question his willingness to be God of all. By so doing, she looks back to the tradition of African American writers who recognize and celebrate God's sovereignty, especially early poets such as Phillis Wheatley. However, she also looks forward to the tradition of African American women writers, such as Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, and Paule Marshall, who challenge traditional conceptualizations of God and offer alternatives to His omnipotence and sovereignty. Her poem therefore recognizes where black folks were initially in relation to Christianity and where they ended up many centuries from that starting point.

Brooks thus anticipates two scholars of African American literature who recognize the significance Christianity has served throughout its history. As Richard Barksdale and Keneth Kinnamon point out in their introductory comments to *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology* (Barksdale and Kinnamon 1972), an early and well-respected anthology of African American literature, the "appeal of Christianity" (Barksdale and Kinnamon 1972, p. 2) was one of the two driving forces in African American literary creativity in its first century or so of existence (the other was "the quest for liberty and equality"). While this essay will focus on how African American women writers treat Christianity, it is worthy of note that several of the early writers in this tradition of the appeal of Christianity were male. For example, Jupiter Hammon, who was enslaved in Massachusetts, penned a poetic account of his salvation as early as 1760. Frederick Douglass wrestled with the inconsistencies of slaveholders keeping their fellow human beings in servitude and professing to be Christian, but he also held a Sabbath School for his fellow bondspeople (Douglass [1845] 1945). Years later, in his poem entitled "An Antebellum Sermon," Paul Laurence Dunbar envisioned a Moses-like figure leading black people out of bondage (Dunbar [1896] 1991). During the Harlem Renaissance, James Weldon Johnson published *God's Trombones* (Johnson [1927] 1955), which he subtitled *Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*. At mid-twentieth century, James Baldwin also engaged this topic, particularly in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (Baldwin 1953), which explores the religious conversion, as well as the backsliding, of a fundamentalist preacher who migrates from the South to Harlem. Recognizing that the appeal of Christianity attracted these and other male writers, I nonetheless focus for the remainder of this discussion primarily on women writers and their representations of how Christianity and various forms of spirituality shaped the lives of their characters from their arrivals in the New World to contemporary manifestations. From embracing Christianity to illustrating its contradictions and shortcomings, as Gwendolyn Brooks does, African American women writers have showcased responses to Christianity that range from acceptance to rejection and finally to suggesting that different kinds of spirituality might be more appealing to and useful for their female characters.

The literary embracing of the Christian concept of believing that God plans one's destiny perhaps begins with Phillis Wheatley—and understandably. Here was this orphaned girl, forcefully taken from her African home, and landed in a Boston household where she was treated like mini-royalty. The circumstances of her existence—which probably included having to listen to tales of dark, "heathen" Africa—perhaps made it easy for her to believe that she had been fortunate to have been rescued and deposited in a "safe," though serving, environment. Wheatley ostensibly thanked God for having brought her from unenlightened, heathen Africa into the beatific light of the Western world. No matter our desire to have Wheatley question those so-called benign enslavers, her words are there to certify her position and to offer pushback from our own: "Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,/Taught my benighted soul to understand/That there's a God, that there's a saviour too:/Once I redemption neither sought nor knew" (Barksdale and Kinnamon 1972, p. 41). Consider representations of God as well in the poetry of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper in the mid-nineteenth century, especially "The Slave Auction" and "The Slave Mother." In the face of separation from loved ones during total repression, mothers could cry out only to God, in whose image they assert they have been made. Consider Charlotte Forten Grimke's praising of God in her work among the recently enslaved on the Sea Islands:

"I will pray that God in his goodness will make me noble enough to find my highest happiness in doing my duty" (Grimke 1953, p. 137). She also remarks, on several occasions, about how those among whom she worked sang about and praised God. Belief in Christianity was still strongly prevalent in the 1920s in the works of playwright Georgia Douglas Johnson, whose characters in her lynching play, *A Sunday Morning in the South*, sing several rounds of religious songs as a young black man is falsely accused of rape and ultimately lynched. That outcome brings cries of "For God's sake" and repeated exaltations of "Lord have mercy" (Perkins and Stephens 1998, pp. 108, 109).

What I want to emphasize here is the seeming unqualified acceptance of Christianity from the beginnings of African American written literacy, an acceptance that would still be the case well into the first few decades of the twentieth century, not only with Johnson's characters but with others, such as Janie Crawford's grandmother in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston [1937] 1990). They uniformly pray fervently for divine intervention in the troubles of their lives. It is shortly after all those praying women in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* try to work out their souls' salvation that African American women writers begin to punch holes in the idea that Christianity is the be-all and end-all of their existences. Indeed, Baldwin anticipates those writers in examining the tenets in that contradictory religion that lead persons of sensitive natures to question or reject it.

Yet Baldwin and his close friend, playwright Lorraine Hansberry, despite their personal quarrels with Christianity, were the standard bearers of the tradition in the 1950s. Some of Baldwin's characters, such as Esther in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, seemed to be damned for being out of the church. Esther is labeled a "scarlet woman" who deserves death in childbirth for having an affair with a preacher and bearing a child out of wedlock. Hansberry's Beneatha Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun* (Hansberry [1959] 1988) is viewed as being in danger of hellfire because she does not believe in God. Yet Baldwin and Hansberry were at war with Christianity. Baldwin's love/hate relationship with the religion haunted him from the time of his tenure as a youth minister in a holiness church in Harlem, where he preached between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. Hansberry was drawn away from Christianity through the intellectual traditions she embraced in college, as well as through those to which she was exposed under the tutelage of Paul Robeson.

No matter her own path, Hansberry created the character I credit with taking the last stand, that is, an unqualified position *in favor of Christianity*, in African American literature. That character is Mama Lena Younger, the towering grandmother and matriarch of the Younger family in *A Raisin in the Sun*, which opened on Broadway in March of 1959. The head of a family of black sharecroppers transplanted from Mississippi to Chicago, Mama Lena is as staunch in her Christian belief as she is solid in her large physical form. She is one of the long-suffering black women of Christian tradition who believes that God makes a way out of no way, that all one has to do is trust in His power, His promise always to supply one's needs. Mama Lena is therefore understandably *un*-understanding when her daughter Beneatha attempts to crack the very rock on which Mama's religious foundation stands. The conversation centers upon Beneatha's assertion that she is going to be a doctor:

> MAMA (*Kindly*) 'Course you going to be a doctor, honey, God willing.
>
> BENEATHA (*Drily*) God hasn't got a thing to do with it.
>
> MAMA Beneatha—that just wasn't necessary.
>
> BENEATHA Well—neither is God. I get sick of hearing about God.
>
> MAMA Beneatha!
>
> BENEATHA I mean it! I'm just tired of hearing about God all the time. What has He got to do with anything? Does He pay tuition?
>
> MAMA You 'bout to get your fresh little jaw slapped! . . .
>
> BENEATHA Why? Why can't I say what I want to around here, like everybody else?
>
> MAMA It don't sound nice for a young girl to say things like that—you wasn't brought up that way. Me and your father went to trouble to get you and Brother to church every Sunday.

> BENEATHA Mama, you don't understand. It's all a matter of ideas, and God is just one idea I don't accept. It's not important. I am not going out and be immoral or commit crimes because I don't believe in God. I don't even think about it. It's just that I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort. There simply is no blasted God—there is only man and it is he who makes miracles!
>
> (MAMA absorbs this speech, studies her daughter and rises slowly and crosses to BENEATHA and slaps her powerfully across the face. After, there is only silence and the daughter drops her eyes from her mother's face, and MAMA is very tall before her)
>
> MAMA Now—you say after me, in my mother's house there is still God. (*There is a long pause and* BENEATHA *stares at the floor wordlessly.* MAMA *repeats the phrase with precision and cool emotion*) In my mother's house, there is still God.
>
> BENEATHA In my mother's house there is still God. (*A long pause*)
>
> MAMA (*Walking away from* BENEATHA, *too disturbed for triumphant posture. Stopping and turning back to her daughter*) There are some ideas we ain't going to have in this house. Not long as I am at the head of this family.
>
> BENEATHA Yes ma'am. (Hansberry [1959] 1988, pp. 38–39)

I call this Christianity's last stand in African American literature in part because Mama Lena can force a recitation, but she cannot force belief. No matter her words to the contrary, Beneatha has not changed her mind, and Mama Lena has seemingly temporarily forgotten some of the tolerance that so characterized Jesus (also, note as well that Hansberry, in capitalizing the pronouns in reference to God, inadvertently adheres to some Christian belief—or at least practice—as well). Christianity merely bolsters the tyranny that I assign to Mama Lena (most readers and scholars are wonderfully forgiving of her violence and her authoritarian management of everybody's lives). After Mama Lena Younger's appearance, Christianity disappears from African American literary texts altogether or evolves into different forms of spirituality. The Black Arts Movement and the Black Aesthetic of the 1960s brought with them a questioning of just about everything that did not evolve from within black communities, and that included Christianity. How could the religion be benign, militant young writers asked, if it were responsible for the very tenets on which racist America was founded? It must be rejected even as its original practitioners were to be rejected.

It is a fascinating process, therefore, to chart the transformation of religious belief in African American literary texts by women writers after the 1960s. And I should pause to say that some African American male writers were also sensitive to the limits of Christianity, such as Ishmael Reed in the African-inspired belief system that he espouses in *Mumbo Jumbo* (Reed 1970). Especially noteworthy among male writers is the reconceptualization of a mythic world view for people of African descent that Henry Dumas envisions in his works, especially in his short story, "Ark of Bones," which is also undergirded with African belief systems. The keepers of the Ark are ancient guardians who sail the world retrieving the bones of drowned people of African descent; they moan and recite "Aba aba, al ham dilaba" (Dumas 1974, p. 15) each time they retrieve such remains. African American women writers, however, are my focus here, and no work by such a writer signaled as dramatic a change in the transforming of religious belief than Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, a choreopoem that reached major stages in 1976. Playwright Shange had premiered the work in coffee houses in California and New York before staging its final version. A *collage* of tales that black women, identified only by the colors they wear, tell about their complex and often traumatizing life experiences, *For Colored Girls* dared to uncover the divinity *within* African American women. In a way, the women bring God to earth and thereby collapse the divide between human and divine even as they assert their own divinity.

These women, like Mama Lena, have undoubtedly endured the troubles of the world. However, *unlike* Mama Lena, they have refused to take their burdens to the Lord and leave them there. The women recount stories of sexual, psychological, and physical abuse. With torn bodies and worn minds, they seek

comfort in this world, *not* in the hereafter, *not* in a source that derives outside their world, and *not* in anything masculine. Their pain is encapsulated in perhaps the most striking narrative in the choreopoem. The Lady in Red, Crystal, tells the story of giving birth to two children for Beau Willie Brown, her common law partner, before he is drafted to serve in Vietnam. Returned to the United States, he suffers the mental traumas of war and drugs coupled with the psychological inadequacy of being unable to provide for his children. On a visit to Crystal and the children, he repeats his invitation to her to marry him. When she hesitates once again, he holds their two toddlers out of a fifth story window and, despite her protestations, drops them onto the sidewalk below. Crystal's pain in response to the deaths of her children epitomizes all the women's pain. They have suffered at the hands of their lovers, husbands, children, dreams, expectations, and desires—the hands of the intangible as well as the hands of the tangible. And they decide that no god beyond the skies can help them. They themselves must re-shape the impact of the hands that touch them.

They do this by coming together to provide comfort to each other. The seven women join hands, *healing* hands, in a circle at the end of the play. In response to the implied question, where is divinity, they assert: "i found god in myself/& i loved her/i loved her fiercely" (Shange 1975, p. 63). In their laying on of hands, they recognize no power to heal that is greater than the power inherent in them. Humanity and temporality triumph over anything in the supernatural realm. Women cannot go to men or to a masculine source of divine power for assistance with their problems with men. They can only turn to the goddess in the feminine and shape that divinity to suit their own purposes.

This laying on of hands is a pattern that occurs in several of the post-1970 texts. Gloria Naylor, for example, adopts the pattern in the story of Ciel Turner in *The Women of Brewster Place* (Naylor [1982] 1983). After Ciel has had an abortion in an effort to keep her man in her life, then finds him leaving anyway, and after her two-year old is electrocuted as Ciel stands pleading with the man to stay, she concludes that she has nothing for which to live. And she certainly lacks any will to pray or even to find a spiritual source within herself. Mattie Michael, the central figure in *Brewster Place*, comes to Ciel and takes her in her arms, rocking her through her grief in the way that women have done throughout the ages. In the process of rocking and by encouraging Ciel to remember other mothers' losses, such as those of captured African women dashing their children's brains against the sides of slave ships, Mattie inspires in Ciel an identification with the feminine, a tiny spark that enables her to keep on keeping on in ways that are as effective but that are decidedly different from Mama Lena Younger's Christian inspiration. Mattie's recognition of Ciel's desire to grieve herself to death, and Mattie's interventionist laying on of hands are what save Ciel. Mattie soothes her, bathes her, strokes her into regeneration. Woman to woman and the spiritual connection between them—no male god as mediator.

The same is true of Avey Johnson in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, which was published in 1983, the year after *The Women of Brewster Place*. Avey recovers from soul-threatening debilitation only through the laying on of hands of another woman. A middle-class housewife who spends her vacations on cruises, Avey becomes restless on one such trip and begins to realize the futility of her life. Taken ill on a small boat between islands, she undergoes the same purging and cleansing process that Ciel Turner undergoes—regurgitation and defecation—before she is washed, massaged, and re-stimulated into life by another woman. Please keep in mind that these are not lesbian encounters. These are situations in which women—even women who are strangers to each other—recognize the pain in other women and opt to do something, via the spiritual connections between them, about their suffering. The commitment to do something other than pray about the suffering enables the injured women to undergo a cleansing/conversion process comparable to those we find in traditional African American church experiences, but without the Christian overtones. Avey comes to understand that she is wasting her life by adhering to a straitlaced middle-class existence. She commits herself to restoring her great-aunt's home in South Carolina and to educating her grandchildren in the traditions of African and African American cultures. Those choices are infinitely better than packing twenty suitcases and going on cruises, where the most exciting part of the day is presentation of dessert.

Rosalie Parvay, who bathes and massages Avey Johnson, is one of many black women of spiritualist powers who seems to derive those powers from nature and harmony with the universe and, we might add, from ancestral African sources—instead of from God. Rosalie joins Minnie Ransom from Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (Bambara [1980] 1992) in using her hands to encourage transformation in Avey: "Immediately [Avey] felt the small hands from last night come to rest on her arm. . . . A laying on of hands" (Marshall 1983), hands that bathe Avey in a cleansing ritual from a woman with "special powers of seeing and knowing" (Marshall 1983, pp. 217, 218). The singing and dancing rituals in which Avey later participates also mark her newfound spirituality as centered in voodoo traditions that people of African descent brought to the Caribbean. Thus, Avey is re-centered, through a reverse Middle Passage, to unity and pride in her blackness. Rosalie's laying on of hands ties Rosalie to women throughout the African Diaspora who use their hands as communication points with the world, and their hands have impressive powers. This is certainly true of Mama Day's baby-catching hands. Gloria Naylor's titular character in *Mama Day* (Naylor 1988) has delivered most of the babies born in Willow Springs in the past seven or eight decades, and she has laid her hands on the sick and the infertile. She entreats George, Cocoa's rationalist husband, to just join his hands in hers and, together, they will be able to save her grandniece from the evils of conjuration. George's refusal does not make Mama Day's hands any less powerful, and it reiterates again the pattern of women saving women without the aid of men (alternative view: George as sacrifice—so he does help). From delivering babies, to picking herbs, to making peach cobblers, coconut cakes, and quilts, Mama Day has hands that powerful forces have anointed. One of those forces is Sapphira Wade, the conjure woman extraordinaire who is responsible for the Day family owning a significant portion of Willow Springs. Mama Day has inherited from Sapphira an extra-natural power that gives her the ability to know without knowing and to see without seeing. Another force is nature, with which Mama Day co-exists in special ways and from which she derives the materials that are the substance of many of her efforts to help her family and neighbors.

Although Mama Day talks to the traditional Christian God and respects His realm, she also recognizes other realms of power. They may not be precisely stated or even precisely knowable, but they exist, and those in tune with them can derive great power from them. Mama Day's democratic approach to belief and power illustrates a diversity that also appears in other texts after 1970. Women characters consistently find sources of power other than Christianity, whether it is Beloved transcending the barriers between life and death in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (Morrison 1987) or Clora existing somewhere between here and there in J. California Cooper's *Family* (Cooper 1991).

Those other ways of relating to the world around us are especially apparent in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (Bambara [1980] 1992). In this novel, which is essentially an extended healing session, a black woman, Velma Henry, has slit her wrists and stuck her head in an oven. Rescued and taken to the local infirmary, a local physician can sew her wrists back together, but her mind needs other attention. It comes in the form of Minnie Ransom, a significantly named and famous healer in the area who shares with Mama Day an understanding of the forces of nature, but who adds to Mama Day's diversity of spiritual possibility with African loa and Eastern religions.

Like Beloved, Minnie Ransom can commune with the dead. She can also actually leave her body, as Cooper's Clora does, but, unlike Clora, she can return at will. Minnie has been called into an understanding of her powers in the way that fundamentalist folk preachers frequently recount being called to perform their Christian services. Minnie's calling comes from another woman who has the power as well, from the very forces of the universe, and it seems more a cross at times than a gift or blessing. Indeed, during this process of calling/selection, Minnie's neighbors conclude that she is deranged:

> They called her batty, fixed, possessed, crossed, in deep trouble. Said they'd heard of people drawn to starch or chalk or bits of plaster. But the sight of full-grown, educated, well-groomed, well-raised Minnie Ransom down on her knees eating dirt, craving pebbles and gravel, all asprawl in the road with her clothes every which way—it was too much to

> bear. And so jumpy, like something devilish had got hold of her, leaping up from the porch, from the table, from morning prayers and racing off to the woods, the women calling at her back, her daddy dropping his harness and shading his eyes, which slid off her back like slippery saddle soap. The woods to the path to the sweet ground beyond, then the hill, the eating hill, the special dirt behind the wash house. (Bambara [1980] 1992, pp. 51–52)

Only Karen, who, after her own death, will become Ole Wife, Minnie's spiritual guide, understands what is happening in Minnie's selection process. Karen and the forces into which she has knowing seem to select Minnie for special work, and they give her power sufficient to achieve the work, including those powers the loa represent. By recognizing a history of spirituality that *precedes* Christianity, as well as the belief systems that co-exist with Christianity, Minnie Ransom adds a multiplicity to Mama Day's diversity.

Ole Wife, Minnie Ransom's ghost familiar, attends as Minnie lays hands on Velma's innermost being and draws her out of a will to die and into an exuberant desire for life. The pain that Velma has experienced from doing the jobs of seven people, having a cheating husband, and not being a very good mother to her adoptive son, all crystallized in the act of her attempted suicide. There is peace, she concludes, as well as safety, in annihilation. But Minnie stands at the gate, barring annihilation, just as Mattie Michael stood at the same gate with Ciel Turner. Life is too valuable, Minnie and Mattie argue, for it to be simply given up; both injured women must instead learn to accept the weight of living. Both interveners give to their charges a piece of themselves, and both women serve as the inspirational source through which the injured women reach out and grasp something that keeps them in this world.

Minnie and Velma sit on stools facing each other in the Southwest Community Infirmary in Clayborne, Georgia. Minnie duplicates and refines the laying on of hands that defined the interactions of the women in *For Colored Girls* as well as the relationship between Mattie and Ciel in *The Women of Brewster Place*. She holds on to Velma, talks to her, and encourages Velma to remember and then *let go* of the painful things that have brought her to this point. Velma sits in a semi-comatose state, but she is nonetheless able to hear and understand what Minnie is saying.

Minnie's healing process, which frequently includes the laying on of hands, is described thusly:

> Calcium or lymph or blood uncharged, congealed and blocked the flow, stopped the dance, notes running into each other in a pileup, the body out of tune, the melody jumped the track, discordant and strident. And she would lean her ear to the chest or place her hand at the base of the spine till her foot tapped and their heads bobbed, till it was melodious once more. And often she did not touch flesh on flesh but touched mind on mind from across the room or from cross town or the map linked by telephone cables that could carry the clue spoken—a dream message, an item of diet, a hurt unforgiven and festering, a guilt unreleased—and the charged response reaching ear then inner ear, then shooting to the blockade and freeing up the flow. Or by letter, the biometric reading of worried eyes and hands in writing, the body transported through the mails, body/mind/spirit out of nexus, out of tune, out of line, off beat, off color, in a spin off its axis, affairs aslant, wisdom at a tangent and she'd receive her instructions. And the turbulence would end. (Bambara [1980] 1992, pp. 48–49)

If there are prayers here, they emanate from sources other than the Christian. Bambara was particularly known for her exploration of a variety of ways of knowing, a variety of spiritual ways of being in the world, and she allows all of those to be expressed in *The Salt Eaters*. She is not as democratic as Gloria Naylor, in that Christianity does not play a comparable role in the text to other ways of knowing and being. One of Velma's mentors, in fact, reiterates again and again how important it is for young people to discover ways of *being* in the world. In that discovery, Bambara allows them to keep their options open. If the loa sustains them, fine; if music and the dance of the universe sustains them, that is equally fine. So too with Eastern religions. Bambara finally collapses opposing systems into a syncretism reminiscent of Zora Neale Hurston's discussions of the incorporation of Catholic rituals into voodoo traditions.

Velma returns to wholeness and reclaims a desire to live as much because of what Minnie does as because of what Minnie inspires her to discover *within* herself. Velma similarly finds the divinity that the women find in *For Colored Girls*. And Velma finally comes to understand that her seeming trials have been mere preparation for what she will eventually have to endure. The text suggests that her role is to follow in the footsteps of Minnie Ransom and that Minnie is playing for her the role that Karen or Ole Wife played for Minnie. Velma's discovery of the power she has and the power into which it is her destiny to become linked could reasonably be read as the institutionalization of a goddess cult, or perhaps even the assumption of godhead without the cult connotation. Indeed, readers could arguably point to African-based influences in what Bambara offers as explanation for Velma's assumption of extra-natural powers. However, Bambara limits any possible separation between goddess and people by keeping Velma's feet solidly in the realm of the human. She, like Ole Wife and Minnie, can transcend the human on occasions, but she must also return. The major work required of her lies with humankind. And by envisioning life and temporal-expanding possibilities she *will be* able to accomplish that work.

Mama Lena Younger, for all her claims to Christian love, would probably predict for Velma, Minnie, the women in *For Colored Girls*, and just about everybody else after 1970 assignment to the lower rungs of hell. From the Christian perspective that Mama Lena espouses, all of these women would be considered workers of the devil. What is engaging about these works and characters, however, is their refusal to lock themselves into the Christianity that historical African American communities embraced. Such contemporary embracing would suggest acquiescence to a belief system that, for centuries, had been used, when convenient, to oppress them. Instead, these characters turn away from and develop alternatives to the religious practice that could potentially oppress them; they do not try to find within its oppression justification for its own contradictions.

Other post-1970 writers transform Christianity in other ways. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (Walker 1982) provides one example, while Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (Butler 1993) provides another. Walker's Celie begins the process of redefining spirituality by rejecting the visual images of Jesus and God that saturate African American churches. By positing that one such image looks like a fat white man in a local bank, Celie reduces presumed potency to a less than all-powerful level. While the white man in the bank might still have a lot of power, he is nonetheless no more human than she is. By redefining that crucial image, Celie is poised to be receptive when Shug suggests that God is not a she or a he, but an "It" that becomes annoyed if people fail to notice the beauty of nature. In its animalist reconceptualization of the spiritual, *The Color Purple* evokes African origins and moves thoroughly into the realm of nature that is so central to how Minnie Ransom understands her position in the world. Also, by granting to human beings the power to create God in their image—instead of imagining that they are created in the image of God—Celie and Shug anticipate the move that Butler makes in her treatment of spirituality in *Parable of the Sower*.

The title of Butler's novel suggests something biblical and perhaps even innocuous; the former is true, but the latter is not. Butler's *Parable*, published in 1993, is a post-apocalyptic look at the United States, and especially southern California. Twenty twenty-four is a futuristic time when the homeless outnumber those who have homes, and those who still have such structures reside within walled communities. Values that one might expect in a so-called Christian environment no longer hold true. People generally do not help each other—beyond the small groups that reside within the walled communities; rather, they steal, rape, rob, and kill before they can be killed. This is a world where people take a drug and set fires because of the sexual thrill it gives them; they have no remorse about the people who die in such fires. It is somewhat surprising, then, that Lauren Olamina, the young protagonist of the tale, is the daughter of a Baptist minister and actually undergoes the process of being baptized. Like Hansberry's Beneatha Younger, however, she questions her parent's faith. More striking, she articulates her own concept of being in the world. She may well be one of Bambara's futuristic children who brings together several ways of thinking about being in order to evolve her own system.

A member of a small walled community that is eventually assaulted and destroyed, Lauren initially experiences the safety that walls bring. She, her family, and the neighbors travel together in packs, protecting each other. They also go out into the hills for target practice; even fifteen-year-olds must learn how to shoot, for this is a world where guns and violence are pervasive. There is a constant clash between Lauren's father's desire to live up to the standards of his Christian teachings and the reality that exists just beyond his gates. That reality wins.

In recognition of the world in which she lives, Lauren adheres to this philosophy:

All that you touch
You Change.

All that you Change
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
Is Change.

God
Is Change. (Butler 1993, p. 3)

This belief is in direct contradiction to the very basis of historical African American Christian practice, which fervently asserts that God *never* changes ("Hold to God's *unchanging* hand," so one song goes). Identifying change as god places Lauren in the category of the many female characters in post-1970 literature who can envision something else, some other way of being in the world. And Lauren's world is one in which natural and human disasters belie any possibility for things remaining constant. Instead of fashioning a god who is static, and thereby running the risk of insanity from watching things change dramatically by the hour, Lauren fashions a useful spirituality, one that will sustain her and her people as they move toward a new space in a dying world.

Parable of the Sower, then, is less biblical than the adoption of a biblical paradigm to explain the creation of a new religion, a new spirituality. The sower is Lauren, and the parable is her *Earthseed: Books for the Living*, a diary that she keeps. She therefore positions herself as Bambara positions Velma: to rise to leadership and perhaps even to goddess status within her world. The flexibility of the system of belief Lauren develops allows for occurrences that would negate a strict application of Christian principles. One of the primary tenets of Christianity, "Thou shall not kill," is irrelevant in Lauren's world. If one cannot kill in the jungle that southern California has become, then one will surely die.

Lauren is unique in the representation of African American female character, in that she becomes a killer, a very efficient one, during the course of the text. She and the women in Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West* (Cleage 1994) have this trait in common, in that they act violently when necessary to protect community and friends. Lauren realizes that predators are ever willing to take advantage of the weak by stealing or outright demanding their food and provisions, and she must be prepared to protect herself and those around her. That predatory possibility increases once Lauren is forced from her walled community; consequently, everyone is on foot once Lauren's community is attacked and all her family is killed. She decides to move toward Oregon and the possibility of finding work, or at least a place to stay until space travel is available. The fact that she believes or hopes sufficiently to move is admirable. She collects people—her Earthseed—along the way.

Two facts are noteworthy about Lauren's movement and actions during the course of the novel. First, she travels disguised as a man, forming a group with the only other two members of her walled community who have survived. Because she has been visionary enough to know that the destruction was coming, she has prepared for it with food and other provisions. Thus, she is able to assume leadership from the beginning. The people initially joining the group believe they are taking orders from a masculine authority, and Lauren's ability to lead and direct serves her well. Butler therefore upsets usual expectations for female action and allows her character room for maneuvering.

Second, Lauren is hyperempathetic. Because her mother used drugs during her pregnancy, Lauren is marked with being able to experience the pain of anyone whose injury she witnesses. Naturally, when she kills predators at close range, she suffers with them as they die. The trait causes her to be immobilized on several occasions, but it is not ultimately handicapping. What is important about it in the spirituality consideration is that it is a curse and a blessing. As a person who founds a religion, it is important that Lauren be generally empathetic to the people willing to follow her. But if she rises—if they elevate her—to the status of goddess, she can literally feel their pain. She echoes Velma Henry in some ways, but she is unlike Velma in that Lauren's power—if we want to call it that—derives from a biological rather than a universal source.

Butler's creation of a physically and mentally powerful black woman whose very flaw seems less a flaw than a potential asset is something new in the literature—as is the creation of a religion in direct opposition to and denial of the power of Christianity. Butler also succeeds in expanding the belief system to incorporate men instead of it simply nurturing black women. The fact that its founder is female, however, ties it to all the other attempts to articulate spirituality from an African American female, if not feminist, perspective.

A few years earlier than Butler's *Parable*, Toni Morrison also articulated a new form of spirituality created in opposition to the circumstances in which its practitioners found themselves. In *Beloved* (Morrison 1987), Morrison allows Baby Suggs to name herself "holy," as Shange's women do, and to elevate herself to the status of preacher. Her congregation is black people newly freed from slavery, and her church is the open air of the forests in Cincinnati, Ohio. Baby Suggs teaches her people to love themselves, particularly their flesh, because other people do not. Self-love is the greatest love of all, and there is no blasphemy in it. Again, if Christianity has allowed slavery and has directed love to a source beyond the self, then reclamation of the self after slavery similarly means a re-directing of that love. Baby Suggs's teachings might not be as formalized as Lauren Olamina's, but they are nonetheless sustaining.

But Butler's new religion and Morrison's new spirituality are not the end of the story. Morrison's *Paradise* (Morrison 1998) takes us back to a convent in Oklahoma in the first half of the twentieth century. However, the nuns who occupy the Convent are not the primary focus of the text. They die out, and the women who replace them in the 1970s are anything but Christian. The Convent becomes home to five women—one black, three white, and one Hispanic (the latter was brought from South America by one of the nuns). The women end up in the Convent almost as Gloria Naylor's characters find their way to *Bailey's Café* (Naylor 1992)—because of some horrific physical or psychic violation. Mavis has allowed her twin babies to suffocate in a car while she shopped for groceries; Grace (Gigi), who has witnessed a child die in a riot in Oakland, has left her jailed boyfriend and come to Oklahoma looking for a rock formation in the shape of fornicating lovers; Seneca has been used as a sex slave; and Pallas's mother competed with her and took her boyfriend. These walking wounded find comfort with Connie, the girl—now woman—whom one of the nuns rescued. Connie thus becomes a kind of secular Mother Superior to the women.

Despite their histories, the women manage to co-exist rather peacefully. The Convent, as a retreat, places no restrictions upon them. Connie does not complain if they have affairs with the men in town (she has had one herself), or if they sunbathe in the nude. She finally decides, however, that they should reclaim something of themselves, and she institutes rituals that the local townspeople consider cultist and the devil's work. How the locals respond to the women allows Morrison to re-visit *Beloved* in her crossing of ontological realms and attempt to find a haven for women who are dead but not dead. Not exactly like Cooper's Clora, but certainly not like Bambara's Velma Henry, the women come to exist "down here in Paradise"—wherever that is. And, they assert, they must continue with the "endless work they were created to do" (Morrison 1998, p. 318; even using the word "down" is an interesting reversal from traditional Christianity, where Paradise is perceived to be "up"). Morrison saves her characters from themselves as well as from the world, but she does not allow that safety in a temporal space. Magical realism certainly informs wherever her characters end up, but their demises and their

departures are shrouded in mystery and supernaturalism. Morrison, like many of her contemporaries, envisions a world for black female characters where they can name their own way of being, where they can transcend all that would, like Zora Neale Hurston's Nanny, roll their horizons into a ball.

And yet Morrison shares the focus on and interest in African American women, in naming spirituality first and foremost from their perspective. The evils in *Paradise* are mostly contained in the patriarchs of the all-black town who use the Bible as their basis for naming evil. The women try to forge a different way of being in the world—or in the hereafter. They are the imaginative shapers of a new spirituality, and their efforts become one of the sharpest ways to distinguish how African American male and female character is represented in the literature.

Those shapers of a new spirituality are especially relevant in post-1970 literary texts by African American women writers in which Christianity is completely absent. I am thinking particularly of works in the science fiction, speculative fiction, and horror traditions. Female characters in such narratives derive their reliance on extra-natural energy from within themselves or by virtue of being initiated into a particular power cult by someone already in it. Consider the second Gilda in Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (Gomez 1991). That young African American woman gets her power from the first Gilda, and it is the power of immortality inherent in vampire culture. She can therefore accomplish many things that mere mortals cannot, and she has special bonds—both physical and mental—with other women vampires. Similarly, Octavia E. Butler's protagonist in *Fledgling* (Butler 2005) has no Christianity hanging over her head as she lives out her vampire existence. Certainly, these characters have values, and they thrive on relationships and communities, but there is nothing that leads them to think of a power or a spirituality that exists outside of their own realms of being. Butler's Anyanwu in *Wild Seed* (Butler 1980) captures the pattern as well. Her gods are African and ancient but easily left behind as she migrates with Doro to the New World of North America. For the more than two hundred years that Butler traces her supernatural existence in the novel, Anyanwu does not bow to or create tenets of Christianity in her belief system. While what she believes is ancient and old, it does not ultimately guide her actions in the world. She uses her own powers, together with her shapeshifting abilities, to confront and dispatch any threats to her existence or to the existences of her offspring. Arguably, characters in these three novels take ideas about belief systems into realms that have absolutely no basis in anything African Americans have encountered on New World soil.

But representation merely harks back to history, and it is noteworthy that African American women writers are far ahead of women in historical black communities in trying to name a different way of being. Most of the real-life women who still adhere to some form of organized religion are naming it male and bowing to it. That is particularly ironic given the numbers of black women who comprise the congregations of most of these churches. Out of curiosity in Alabama recently, I observed the difference in numbers at the church into which I was baptized. On that particular Sunday, there were 27 men in church and more than 150 women. Like this church, most African American congregations are heavily—that is, 85% to 95%—female. But, as in Morrison's *Paradise*, the men are in charge. The women are mostly content to fill the servant roles that Celie finds to be her lot in the church in *The Color Purple*—they keep the church clean, provide the items the minister needs on Sunday morning, serve in Pastor's Aid clubs, prepare the meals for all the after-funeral gatherings, and generally remain vocally invisible. Tellingly, when I questioned a Baptist minister many years ago about the absence of female leaders, particularly deacons, in his church congregation, his reply was remarkable: "Dr. Harris," he intoned, "making a woman a deacon would be like a man having a baby." His articulation of gender hierarchy is reflected again and again—even into contemporary times—in the dynamics of such churches.

It warrants reiterating, therefore, that the literary counterparts to these historical women are so wonderfully vocal, so active in naming their pains and their needs, and so aggressive in insisting that it is important for those needs to be met. Those literary women do not even recognize that they have lesser roles to inhabit in some predefined patriarchal hierarchy. They challenge, re-define, and re-purpose, and they encourage other women to do so. They believe in themselves and their

capabilities and do not wait for masculine authorities to articulate how their energies might best be put to use. They join Anyanwu in being spiritual, if not physical, shapeshifters, and they therefore tap into powers and creativity that enable them to grace the earth with dignity and to re-define, consistently, ways of being in the world. Literature mostly does not imitate life in this instance, but it is certainly an instance in which those overburdened black women in churches throughout the United States could learn a thing or two from their literary sisters.

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Essay

Community and Naming: Lived Narratives of Early African American Women's Spirituality

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Abstract: Through the story of Francis Sistrunk, nineteenth century enslaved and later freedwoman in east central Mississippi, this essay illustrates that, despite few surviving written narratives of early black women's spirituality, their experiences can emerge from the silences. Much like paleontologists who recreate narratives of the past through fossils, in the present world of literary studies, we have the advantage of an expanse of resources that, when pieced together, can convey voices from the past to the present. This includes resources such as extant oral and written communal and family narratives, generational ideals and practices, digitized records from official and personal documents, and the recent emergence of DNA technology that provides its own narratives. From the earliest arrivals to the Americas, African diasporic populations maintained an understanding of community and spirit as an integrated oneness empowered through the word, particularly in the word-act of naming. Francis' story reveals that this spiritual ethos was a generative source, not only for survival, but for some black women it was a mechanism for inscribing their presence, their narratives, and their legacies for future generations. Francis Sistrunk's story re-emerges through the mining of sources such as these, and reveals that enslaved black women reached for and seized power where they found it to preserve the record of their existence and humanity and to record the story of their enslavers' injustices.

Keywords: African American women's spirituality; nommo; multimodal narrative; self-actualization; community; asylum hill project; naming; pre-emancipation; genealogy

1. Introduction: Community Is Spirit

Among the earliest frameworks of African American women's self-actualization was a sense of belonging and identity, informed by a commonly shared African ethos, maintaining the interconnectedness of secular and sacred[1]. As such, individual identity formation was shaped through group affinity, and that connecting structure was built upon the concept of the community or group as a collective spiritual corpus. Community is the core of individual actualization, but the individual self must be proclaimed before the community. One might liken this to the Puritan conversion process that calls for public pronouncement before a candidate is admitted into the so-called community of saints. For Puritans, however, the church world was presumed sacred and separate

[1] This epistemology of the spiritual is discussed in a number of studies on African American literature and culture. In both her anthropological research and her fiction, Zora Neale Hurston was a pioneer of serious creative and scholarly work on African influences in the African diaspora of the Americas. Her anthropological works, *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938) underscored the African informed ethos of an interconnected world of the spiritual and the material worlds. Examples of studies beyond Hurston's early 20th Century research that also speak to this Africana ethos include Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977 Oxford UP), particularly chapter 1, "The Sacred World of Black Slaves", Michael Gomez's *Exchanging Our Country Marks* (Gomez 1998); Albert Raboteau's *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (2001 Oxford UP), and Jason Young's "African Religions in the Early South", in *The Journal of Southern Religion* 14 (2012).

from the evil of the material world. Africans and their descendants in the Americas were not inheritors of this worldview. Instead, they saw the spiritual as both material and ethereal. Therefore, for early African Americans, one's place in the community constituted a spiritual belonging—one's soul, one's humanity was confirmed through community. Early African American communities consisted of enslaved people who formed bonds that guided them in living through the commonplace violence and terror of slavery, maintaining their collective understanding of the world and themselves as sacred. These communities celebrated and marked births, family unions, deaths, and other individual and collective hallmarks. Moreover, when slavery was abolished, freed black people continued and passed on this tradition of community and spirit. This tradition of community and spirit survives today throughout African American communities. In the US South, this legacy survives most notably in the longstanding tradition of family reunions. These celebrations bring generations together to reaffirm family and community bonds, that are for many still cemented through time honored religious and spiritual practices. Ceremonies of remembrances are practiced to date, and for many, calling or naming the ancestors remains part of the family ritual that centers all in an individual and collective oneness.

Early Africans in the Americas transported a sense of community that, while built on the belief of the collective as a cohesive body, called for individual pronouncements of self and identity. As part of the collective network, individuals define and declare their identities and place in the community, and throughout West African societies from which the New World enslaved originated, naming marked the beginning and gateway to self-actualization. This ethos of naming rests in an understanding that nommo, or the life force, emanates from the word: "the word is productive and imperative, calling forth and commanding" (Smith 2018, p. 12). Naming, then, is the conduit to existence or being, for "'there is nothing that there is not; whatever we have a name for, that is'" (Jahn 1961, p. 133). This Yoruba proverb underscores the epistemological and spiritual ethos that early Africans transported to their diasporic communities, and its importance has continued for generations, pre- and post-emancipation. In particular, because it is not a static or formulaic phenomenon, nommo "emphasizes the changing now, the improvisatory self", and that "each human has the capacity to bring forth divine power" to create and recreate (Osumare 2018, pp. 770–71). It is in this aspect of nommo, that is, in its pliability, that it has served diasporic African populations in the Americas, as they have had to continually transform themselves in response to changing, but persistent, racist white power structures. Many early enslaved Africans maintained continental African names, either in whole or in transformed versions, many maintained names in addition to the name their enslaver might have imposed. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the newly emancipated chose their names with deliberation to convey their new sense of selves, but to also note their family and community connections. Today, African Americans continue the practice of nommo: notably are those who choose African and Muslim names for themselves and their offspring, and those who continue the practice of inventing new names that defy Eurocentric identity. African Americans have had a long history of negotiating nommo: from the earliest African arrivals to their enslaved and later freed generations, naming has entailed a cycle of unnaming and naming. This is underscored in the history of countless African captives imported to enslavement in the Americas, who upon arrival were not recorded by name, as well as those renamed by their enslavers. In key historical moments we see the dynamic struggle for the power of self-agency that rests in renaming and naming[2]. Early examples of this African American proclamation of self-empowerment are popularly known in the narratives of former enslaved icons, such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, but these stories are under researched on early everyday enslaved persons. In this essay focusing on nineteenth century matriarch, Francis Sistrunk, we see an example of how enslaved black women, whose stories were not conveyed in

[2] See Benston's "I Yam What I Am" Benston (1982) for a detailed focus on naming in African American culture and its manifestation in literature.

conventional literary forms, invoked the power of nommo to leave a narrative trail of their existence and their family's history.

2. It Is Not Just the Written: Reimagining What Constitutes Literature

Though this Special Issue underscores the conventional concept of literature as written, I divert in part to illustrate the necessity of reimagining creative and scholarly methods of excavating and hearing black women's narratives, particularly those from colonial to post-emancipation America. While there is significant and growing work that examines 20th and 21st century spiritual influences in black women's writings, little attention is awarded to the complex spiritual influences in the writings and lives of pre-C20 black women. For example, today we find a substantial body of scholarship focusing on spirituality in contemporary black women's fiction. This includes scholarship on the fictional works of celebrated black women writers, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gayle Jones. Many of these studies explore the diverse modes of African American narration employed in works of fiction by women. Toni Morrison's novels have probably been the most extensively studied body of African American women's fiction, and black women's spirituality in Morrison's fiction has been a prevalent topic in scholarship on her works. Much scholarship can be found, for example, on Morrison's earlier and most celebrated novels, (Morrison 1987) and Morrison (1988), and much focus has been directed to Morrison's black heroines, who are overwhelmingly the arbiters of familial and communal history and identity. In both works, the women (Pilate in *Song of Solomon* and the community of women who expel the ghost in *Beloved*) are the spiritual links to the past that must be revisited to set the community and the individual's course to healing and emerging into hope.

Similarly, in her often-anthologized short story, "Everyday Use" Walker (1973), Alice Walker focuses on the generational narrative of identity and purpose that is reaffirmed in black women, specifically through the "art" of quilting. The story contrasts the white informed tradition of excavating "cultural artifacts" such as quilts, and displaying them for public gazing. Relegating objects made to enhance life to a state of inertia signifies the spirit or soul in captivity. Instead of reducing quilts to lifeless artifacts, the black women in Walker's story create quilts as mediums of self-expression, that are embodied with the spirit of the quilt maker. The quilts are texts that articulate and confirm these women's sense of identity and community. Walker explores the interconnectedness of black women's spiritual and communal ethos in greater narrative depth in her full-length works, most notably in her award-winning novel, Walker (1982). While there has been criticism that Walker presents black men in a negative light in the novel, the story ends in communal reconciliation and healing facilitated by the women, but extending across gender lines.

The examples above illustrate that black women's spirituality is at the core of some of the most renowned contemporary writings by black women. While scholars of these works are increasingly exploring ways in which spirituality can inform critical readings of these works, these studies still do not significantly address the need to expand literary studies, beyond the presumption that literature equals the written. Studies of creative productions such as music, film, spoken word, and visual art remain in a kind of limbo arena in the academy—particularly in English departments. In recent decades, however, we see an increasing number of interdisciplinary studies that engage film, television, live streaming, and music, finding their way into classrooms and conferences, as well as academic publications. As scholarship on hip hop and rap trends upward, we are witnessing an example of how studies in black creative production are exposing the need to expand serious critical narrative studies beyond the convention of writing. The case of Kinitra Brooks and Kameelah Martin's recently published anthology, *The Lemonade Reader* (Brooks and Martin 2019), illustrates this point. This collection of critical essays takes a deep historical and artistic look at the varying modes of black narratives that informed or infused Beyoncé's multimodal album production, *Lemonade*. Whether one reads/hears in Beyoncé's *Lemonade* as a journey to a black female reconciliation of body and spirit or a dangerous

spectacle of black female rage (see Bell Hooks' criticism, for example), *The Lemonade Reader* portends a C21 expansion of critical engagement with multimodal concepts of literature and narration.

Arguably, the pathway to Beyoncé's *Lemonade* was paved by Julie Dash's C20 Dash (1991) and later text adaptation Dash (1999), *Daughters of the Dust*. It is a work that Beyoncé draws from in *Lemonade* as she traces a community or network of black women that are a source of support along the road to healing. Dash's story of black women's spiritual recovery of history and identity is told through a multidimentional narrative that integrates black folk parables, histories, music, and dance—representing these forms as literary narrations themselves. Dash's and Beyoncé's creative productions invite and have inspired studies that center black spirituality as a requisite lens for critical interpretations of black women's C20 and C21 literature—written and multimodal. This lens has been more slowly employed by scholars of early black women's narratives, where overwhelmingly, studies of black women's spirituality have rested in presumptions of a singular dominating Christian ethos and in the Anglo imposed intellectual paradigm that literature is written. This is evinced in scholarship on the more studied 19th C black women narratives—Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents*, Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*, and Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces,* where little scholarly attention is awarded to African spiritual influences in the ethos and journey of the protagonists. There are exceptions to the Christian informed lens that has dominated studies in early black women's works, and perhaps emerging scholars will continue to dismantle this slanted read of early African American women's spirituality. I have challenged this read in my own scholarship for some time[3]. I now, however, feel more compelled to seek out narratives of the larger body of enslaved black women whose experiences went unvoiced within the realm of the written. These silences tell stories and experiences of generations of everyday black women who were central to building and sustaining the foundations of black communities.

While few enslaved women were able to leave written accounts of their lives, through a multitude of resources, we are able today to hear those voices of the past. Much like paleontologists who recreate narratives of the past through fossils, in the present world of literary studies, we have the advantage of numerous material and cultural fossils. This includes generational beliefs, practices, and ways of knowing that, if pieced together or sampled, can breathe life into black women's muted narratives from generations past. Through an expanse of resources, such as extant oral and written communal and family narratives, digitized records from official and private records, and the recent emergence of DNA technology and access to these records that provide their own narratives, we can convey voices of the past to the present. In this endeavor, that arguably reflects the multimodal latitude central in life writing, we can as well arrive at a greater understanding of black women's spiritual evolution—from antebellum to post emancipation, and into our contemporary moment. In the critical reflection that follows, I share a brief slice of the story that can emerge from this kind of deep dive engagement with nonwritten and unconventional narrative modes.

3. Calling Forth Francis

When I started a few years ago on what began simply as a genealogical charting project on my mother's lines of descent, Francis Sistrunk (b. ~1822) was not a name I had heard in my family's oral or written accounts of our history. I found Francis rather quickly, however, as I worked my way backward from her grandson, Noah Cistrunk (b. 1881), the family patriarch who is held as the unifying figure in the Cistrunk family line of my descent. As I reviewed census and military records on Noah, I found his father, Shadrick (b. ~1847/48), and those documents then led me to Shad's mother, Francis.

[3] Examples of this include "Reworking the Conversion Narrative: Race and Christianity in *Our Nig*." *MELUS* (*Journal of the Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*) 24 (1999), pp. 3–27; *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction* Lexington Press, 2011; and "Making the Awakening Hers: Phillis Wheatley and the Transposition of African Spirituality to Christian Religiosity," in *Cultural Sites of Critical Insight*. Eds. Angela Cotten and Christa Davis Acampora. SUNY Press, 2007. pp. 47–66.

Born between 1822 and 1825 in Georgia, Francis was an "ordinary" enslaved and later freedwoman in east central Mississippi. Through a life writing methodology and deep dive into a multiplicity of archives, the mining of Francis' story highlights the practices, processes, and inventions of early African American mothers who maintained and carried over the ethos of community that was, and remains, central to black survival in a country that continues to hold little value for black humanity. It is this larger import of Francis' life and legacy that informed the evolution of the initial personal project into the larger life writing monograph in progress that examines Francis' narrative as a challenge to the disparaging paradigm of the single black mother.

In 1841, when Ralph W. Emerson (Emerson 2004) published "Self-Reliance", a romanticized myth of rugged American individualism that anchors citizenship and democracy to assertions of individual rights and freedom, Francis appears to already be in the possession of her enslaver, Jacob Sistrunk Jr. A teenager at that time, between 14 and 19 years old, Francis is the lone enslaved person listed on the 1840 census (U.S. Census Bureau 1840) in Jacob Jr.'s Marion County, Georgia household. I think about her as a contemporary of some of the C19 African American authors and figures that I regularly teach: Frances Harper, Harriet Wilson, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Harriet Jacobs. Harriet Wilson (Wilson 1983) is worthy of further mention here, for her fictionalized autobiographical heroine, Frado, whose plight closely parallels the circumstances of young Francis. Just as Wilson's heroine, Francis, is a young enslaved girl with no family or fellow enslaved persons, as company in the white household where she is forced to live. In the case of Wilson's heroine, the result is tragic: Frado grows into a confused, self-denigrating, and isolated young woman who, though ultimately freed from indenture, succumbs to poverty and death at a young age. Wilson narrates a story of failed conversion that seats Frado's fate in the failure of Christianity: Anglo Christianity and its conversion ritual that promises entry into the "community of saints" offers no place for the would-be black convert. Frado is therefore left on her own, and no hearty dose of Emersonian self-reliance is available for this young, black woman, isolated in a world of whiteness.

There are clear distinctions between Francis and Wilson's autobiographical protagonist: Frado is an indentured servant in the free North, and the "mulatto"[4] offspring of a white woman and a black man. On the contrary, while she is identified as mulatto, Francis is the offspring of an enslaved woman and an unnamed white man who may have been her enslaver. This difference in the condition of the mother underscores the condition of Francis in the eyes of the law as slave. By the dawn of the eighteenth century, laws throughout the colonies sealed the generational fate of black people. With the legal decree that children followed the condition of the mother, children fathered by white men and enslaved women were not only not white, they were also not free. By extension, criminalizing sexual unions between white women and black men paved the way for generations of white "baby daddies" that this nation continues to ignore. Unlike Frado's 1850s servitude that ends with the completion of indenture, Francis' story of freedom is part of the collective experience of enslaved people freed after the Civil War. Though she lives in Jacob Jr.'s household as his lone slave, unlike Wilson's fictionalized heroine, Frado, who is similarly isolated in the white New England household that holds her in involuntary servitude, Francis is not alone. The 1840 census (U.S. Census Bureau 1840) reveals that Jacob Jr's farm was adjacent to that of his father, who is recorded as having 10 enslaved people in his household.

With father and son owning adjacent plantations, Francis would have had regular contact with those enslaved on Jacob Sr.'s plantation. The structure of enslaved communities was such that "Women typically resided in matrifocal families with extended and fictive kinship networks" (Millward 2015, p. 23). The two women ages 24–36 on his plantation in 1840 were older than Francis (who is listed in the age group 10–24) and probably functioned as models for the teenaged Francis. Though young

[4] The term "mulatto" is used here and elsewhere in this essay out of its explicit use in the records and texts that are being referenced.

themselves, if either of the two enslaved women on Jacob Sr.'s plantation was nearer the upper limit of the census age category 24–36, if she were not Francis' biological mother, she was of an age and within proximity to serve as a surrogate. Though not regarded as holding familial bonds worthy of recognition, those enslaved on the Sistrunk plantations would have, as enslaved communities did throughout the plantation south, established and cultivated kinship bonds and circles that grounded them in a sense of identity and belonging. With the constant threat of being sold away and separated from family and community, however, these bonds could be, and often were, disrupted or broken.

The death of Jacob Sr. in 1841 likely ended the physical community that Francis shared with the enslaved on his plantation. The enslaved people on Jacob I's 1840 census do not appear to have been disbursed among his offspring. Because most Marion County records were destroyed in an 1845 courthouse fire, the record of Jacob Sr.'s may not be discoverable. This loss makes it more difficult to discern what happened to Francis' early community. They may have been sold to settle his estate, as this was common when deceased plantation owners died in a state of financial insolvency. After 1841, Francis is forced to move with Jacob Jr. and his family as they migrate from Marion County, where they are listed on the 1850 Census (U.S. Census Bureau 1850). By this time, Francis has three sons—John (b. 1844), Hillman (b. 1846), and my ancestor, Shadrick (b. 1848), perhaps the only one of Francis' children not fathered by her enslaver[5]. Francis and her family would be compelled to move when Jacob dictated. Between 1855 and 1856, Jacob moved from Harris County, Georgia to Neshoba County, Mississippi; sometime between 1860 and 1864, he moved to neighboring Winston County; and in the post-war, 1870 Census, he is shown living in the adjacent county of Noxubee (Sistrunk et al. 1997, p. 191).

Jacob II's frequent migrations undoubtedly left Francis with a heightened sense of uncertainty and instability during her pre-emancipation life. Each move could have easily resulted in the disruption of her family; however, Francis' story is a reminder that, in some instances, slave families were able to stay together. Francis' migrations from 1840 to emancipation were not the result of slave sales, and illustrate those cases in which enslaved people moved as family or kinship groups as they were forced to move with their masters. With the move to Harris County, Francis may no longer have had the kinship circle of her Marion County community, but by that time, the young adult Francis had been shaped by those influences. Her resolve and strength, her wit and wisdom, her purposefulness, and her understanding of the necessity to see herself as integral to her community were ways of knowing that were not imparted by her enslavers. These aspects of Francis' character and world view would have originated from the women figures and community to which she had belonged. These relations and processes of generational carryover may not have survived in written texts or oral accounts, but they can be pieced together. Multimodal artifacts that, on their own, provide only faint sketches of Francis emerge into a fuller picture and narrative when superimposed. We see and hear Francis today because, despite the trauma of enslavement, she understood that there were ways, no matter how small, to preserve and narrate one's identity and existence. Her children and their descendants would themselves maintain key practices and ideals that were markers pointing back to the ancestral trail that Francis paved. Thus, they would become living archives of her life. Francis was re-discoverable in the 21st century because she left defining markers.

Francis and her three sons, John, Hillman, and Shadrick, and daughter Lucretia, who survive into the twentieth century, would establish themselves as part of the new Noxubee community of freed persons after the Civil War. I have found no written accounts from the enslaved persons or communities among which Francis and her children would have belonged, but census records show that Francis was able to navigate her life as a "single black mother"—enslaved and free—to keep her family together, establishing a sense of identity, and becoming immersed in their post-war black

[5] While records suggest the need to consider key white enslavers that Jacob may have engaged in business or socially, he remains the most probable paternal progenitor of one, if not all of Francis' "mulatto" children. Francis gave birth to all her children while enslaved by Jacob. She was enslaved by Jacob as a young girl, and she and her children remained in this status until emancipation.

Noxubee County community. With Jacob II's move to Winston County around the eve or during the Civil War, Francis and her family were likely living in Winston during this period as well. At the close of the Civil War or shortly after, Jacob II moved his family to Noxubee County, and Francis, now free, moved her family to Noxubee as well. What prompted the newly emancipated Francis to seemingly follow the move of her former enslaver and his family is unclear, but it would mark the last move of this mother, her children and their descendants that would be directed by the whims of white Sistrunks and their search for prosperity.

4. Listening for Francis: Speaking the Self into Existence through Naming

The post emancipation era spawned a surge in marriages of formerly enslaved couples, including those with children, as well as newly formed unions of freedpersons. For many women like Francis, there was little opportunity to build a family structure reflecting the white patriarchal nuclear family myth. As many African American leaders tied racial uplift to a politics of respectability that shamed unmarried mothers, these women had to envision themselves and their families as legitimate, worthy, and equitable members of their communities. In 1865, at the war's end, Francis, near or early 40 years old, was the mother of 6 children fathered by men who were absent and unavailable as possible marriage prospects. At least 4 of her children were likely fathered by one or more white enslavers, and Shadrick Dowdell, the black man who likely fathered her middle son, Shad, was married with children, and living in the neighboring state of Alabama. Francis may not have been without marriage prospects, but her set of circumstances probably left her hesitant to marry. She could not be certain that marriage would result in a spouse who would accept the role of surrogate father to her children, particularly given the tensions that could arise over colorism. This intraracial tension among African Americans over skin tone and white ancestry dates back to slavery and survives into the 21st century. Countless works by early to contemporary black authors speak to this ongoing and sometimes divisive element of black identity.

Pre and post-emancipation African American communities were shaped by social circumstances originating in slavery. While many formerly enslaved people married and thus confirmed their place within the rubric of Anglo patriarchal respectability, numerous households resembled that headed by Francis. The common practice of separating enslaved parents resulted in generations of family units headed by women, and as in the case of Francis, some households were led by enslaved women whose children were fathered by their enslavers. The prevalence of black female led households in the antebellum south was a striking contrast to Anglo American households that reflected the blueprint of white male patriarchal power. It is a structure that legitimates and places higher values on those households recognized through legally sanctioned marriage and offspring born from these unions.

Francis emerged into the post emancipation world in a circumstance reminiscent of her time in Marion County, GA, where she was the lone enslaved person in the household of Jacob Sistrunk. In Marion, it had been a physical distance marked by her separation from the 10 enslaved persons on the adjacent plantation of Jacob Sr. In 1865, the matter of distance that Francis faced was a sense of social isolation that could arise out of how she might have been perceived through the lens of skin color. This matter notwithstanding, Francis still shared the initial challenges of black southerners in general in the early post emancipation period. One of the first matters was the simple question of identity: who were they in this new world as free people? One of the first steps to answering this question was the choice of names—particularly surnames. black people exercised this practice to varying degrees during enslavement, but in the post-1865 world, they had the license to openly and legally name themselves.

The act of naming serves the purpose of everyday identification, but it also connects people to their past, to each other, and to their kin or community. From the earliest enslaved Africans in the Americas, an ongoing project has entailed "self-creation and reformation of a fragmented familial past", and in the immediate post-emancipation moment, this new state of the free self "was incomplete, if not authenticated, by self-designation" (Benston 667)—that is, naming. For generations, among black

southerners encountering strangers, "Who yo people?" was a commonplace question articulated in varying regional forms. The answer would determine connection and acceptance—not just passing curiosity or acknowledgement of one's origins—but rather a validation (or not) of communal and thus spiritual ties. In the aftermath of slavery, newly freed people chose names that identified them as they desired. Just as their enslaved forefathers, newly freed black people often named their children or took on names themselves that would link to familial lines and kinship communities. In numerous instances, they chose the surname of their past enslavers, and while some may argue that this represented a continuation of black subordination, it served the practical purpose of connecting families and communities and a sense of history[6]. In large numbers, freed people also continued the practice of giving their children Christian names, and while many still argue that this was a white imposed practice during slavery, historian John Thornton reminds us that such assertions are not entirely accurate. In Central Africa, which was the place of origin for more than a quarter of African captives delivered to South Carolina in the early 1700s, "Christianity and Christian names were deep-rooted in Central Africa prior to the Atlantic slave trade", and thus "Christian names have African and not just American (European) origins" (Thornton 1993, pp. 729–30). We must also consider that names associated with Christianity among African Americans may have been of Muslim origins, as Islam and Christianity share ancient texts and stories. Just as the case with Christianity in Africa, the presence of Islam in Africa predates the Middle Passage, and was practiced in enslaved populations "throughout the colonial and antebellum periods" (Gomez 1998, p. 249).

The sketchy story of Francis and community revealed in her unnamed presence as a young enslaved girl in Marion County, Georgia is brought into fuller scope through the overlapping narratives of her sons Hillman (b. 1846) and Shadrick (b. 1847/8), and Shadrick's two children, Sophie (b. 1882) and Noah (b. 1881). Even before emancipation, Francis clearly understood the importance of naming. Naming her third son Shadrick, Francis inserted a marker into the family record that would remind Shad of his identity, as well as preserve her family's history. With the exception of her third born, Francis' children were given Anglo-Western names common among the Swiss-German Sistrunks and the white enslaving inhabitants of the antebellum Georgia and Mississippi regions where Francis resided. While the names of Francis' four sons, John, Hillman, Willis, and Robert seem in line with these names, Shadrick seems to be an exception. Francis clearly does not name Shadrick from the lot of German Anglicized names of her Sistrunk enslavers. Naming her son Shadrick provided a way of remembering and recording the unique family lineage of this son, a lineage that today identifies the descendants of Shadrick as tied to a male line pointing to Africa, not Europe. A combination of archives that included tax records, wills, census records, military records, online genealogy records and resources, family histories, and DNA evidence, show that of Francis' six children, her son, Shadrick, is the forefather of a descent line that he inherits from a black father, whose name was also Shadrick. Francis and the senior Shadrick (surname Dowdell after 1865) encountered one another sometime between 1847 and 1848 in Harris County, Georgia, before Shadrick I was removed to Alabama, where he and his family are listed among the enslaved in Dowdell's 1856 will (Barfield 1961, p. 628). Shadrick I's enslaver, James Dowdell, was among the wealthiest and most powerful plantation owners in Harris County, Georgia, and the bordering Lee and Chambers Counties in Alabama. Dowdell owned a number of plantations and mills, and, as with many wealthy enslavers, he moved his enslaved workers to his different properties as he needed or willed. By 1850, Dowdell's permanent residence was in Chambers County, Alabama, and this relocation from Harris County probably ended Shadrick's contact with Francis and their young child, Shadrick. In the aftermath of the Civil War, Francis chose the surname Sistrunk, and unified her household under this surname. Shadrick is aware that he and his siblings do not share the same fathers, and his consistent census designation of Alabama as his father's

[6] See Laura Alvarez López's "Who Named Slaves and Their Children?" López (2015) for a discussion of the debate on why emancipated African descended people often took on the surnames of their enslavers.

birthplace, suggests that he knows the identity of his biological father. Taking on his mother's surname, Shad affirms his mother's place as family head, and her representation of the family to the community as a unified and cohesive household under a single surname. Not insignificant here as well is that this marks their rebirth: they are born again into freedom, anchored in a matriarchal line.

It is important to consider that while Francis' other children bear names that likely connect to enslavers' names, as with Shad, she may have intentionally bestowed names that linked them to their paternal progenitors. This act would have allowed her an avenue to convey to each child their lineage, to speak to them a narrative of origins, place, and identity. That Francis and her six children were the only slaves that Jacob Jr. owned, and that she had been in his possession from her teenage years, speaks to the likelihood that, as with great numbers of enslaved women, Francis was subjected to sexual violence and exploitation[7]. This further calls for consideration that Sistrunk males cannot be ruled out as progenitors of her mixed race children, or for that matter that Francis, who was identified as mulatto, may herself have been the offspring of an enslaved woman and a Sistrunk male. Ongoing archival research will shed greater light on the lineages of Francis' five other children, and evidence unveiled to date suggest that this research is central to understanding more fully the extent of nommo in Francis' legacy. For example, it is not unlikely that Francis' assertion of this power began not with her third son, Shad, but rather with John, her first. John was a name passed down through numerous Sistrunk families from the line of American descendance, that began with the Swiss German immigrant, Heinrich Sistrunk, who arrived in 1746. John was a popular Anglicized form of the German name, Johannes (or Hans), and is the name of Heinrich's grandson, who in the late 1700s, began the migration of Sistrunks from South Carolina into Lincoln County, Georgia.

John Sistrunk and his brother, Jacob Sr., moved into Lincoln County, where John, who met with greater financial success than Jacob, remained until his death in 1840. To date, I have uncovered no records that confirm the place of Francis' birth; however, in naming her first son John, she may have been leaving a trail marker. John Sistrunk owned several enslaved people, and may have sold or offered Francis as a wedding gift to his nephew, Jacob, Jr. John could have been the paternal progenitor of Francis, a not uncommon circumstance in the slaving world of the Americas. Similarly, records suggest that Francis' fourth child, Willis, may also have been given a name that points to a white paternal lineage. Though not listed as such on the 1860 slave record (U.S. Census Bureau 1860) or later census reports found to date, Willis's paternal line may point to a white enslaver. Willis is a shortened version of the name William, and while there are William Sistrunks in the family line, the name Willis does not appear in Jacob's immediate or extended family line. There is, however, a wealthy plantation owner by the name of Willis Whatley, whose property bordered Jacob's in Marion County, Georgia. Whatley appears on the record of Jacob Sr.'s 1841 estate settlement in Marion County, Georgia, purchasing a number of items[8]. Furthermore, after his father's death, Jacob Jr. moved to Harris County, where he lived in close proximity to wealthy plantation owning Whatley and Dowdell families, until his move to Mississippi in the mid 1850s. These were the kind of circumstances that rendered many enslaved women easy sexual prey to white men; however, if we research more closely through the critical lens of nommo, we may find that these women were exercising power. Through naming, they were pulling away the curtain that concealed their enslavers' crimes.

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[7] In Micheletti et al.'s recent article "Genetic Consequences of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in the Americas" Micheletti et al. (2020), *The American Journal of Human Genetics*, their scientific findings confirm what more recent historical research on the trans-atlantic slave trade has revealed regarding the extreme sexual violence and exploitation black women suffered at the orchestration of white enslavers and traders: "Despite more than 60% of enslaved people brought to each region of the Americas being men, comparisons of ancestry estimates for the X chromosome and autosomes, as well as the comparison of mitochondrial (maternal) and Y (paternal) haplogroups, revealed a bias toward African female contributions to gene pools across all of the Americas. An Americas-wide African female sex bias can be attributed to known accounts of rape of enslaved African women by slave owners and other sexual exploitation" (9).

[8] See "Georgia Probate Records, 1742–1990", database with images, Family Search (https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3OS7-L93B-TS4C?cc=1999178&wc=9SBX-82W%3A267696001%2C267702601: 20 May 2014), Marion > Inventories and appraisements 1839–1853 vol A–B > "images 31, 32, and 33 of 451"; citing Houston County Probate Court Judge, Georgia.

Shadrick becomes the rock upon which Francis establishes her family's place and identity in the community of freedpersons after the war. In the 1870 census (U.S. Census Bureau 1870), Francis is identified as head of household, but by the 1880 census (U.S. Census Bureau 1880), she is listed in the household of her son, Shadrick, and his wife, Susan. John and Hillman head their own households by this time, and although Shadrick is the younger of the three, his mother's residence in his household suggests that she looks to him as family head. While Shad's DNA line confirms that he is born from a paternal African line of descent, this is not confirmed for his siblings' lines. In fact, in the case of siblings John, Willis, Lucrecia, and Robert, records explicitly or implicitly point to the likelihood that their paternal progenitors were white. The family history passed down from Shadrick's descendants maintains that, at some point, the family splintered along lines of skin color. This splintering probably began earlier but seems to have been cemented around 1920, with the death of Francis' last surviving son, Hillman.

While Hillman and his wife, Harriette, had no children, they were central to the survival of the family, especially John's children and descendants. Census and tax records suggest that, by the end of the century, John had met with financial misfortunes. While records show that as early as 1872 the brothers were landowners; the 1900 census (U.S. Census Bureau 1900) shows that they are still farmers, but unlike Hillman and Shadrick, John now rents the property where he and his family reside. By this time, John and his wife Chancy have also assumed guardianship of grandsons, Elisha and Dorsey. Their three daughters appear to have died by the 1900 census. After John and Chancy's death, Hillman and his wife, Harriette, would become the surrogate guardians of John's son, Dorsey (who at age 23, still resided in their household in 1910) (U.S. Census Bureau 1910). Hillman's deep commitment to family and community is further evident in the 1908 Noxubee County records on the enumeration of educable children[9]. He, along with Shadrick, and Noah are listed under the category of parent or guardian. Noah registers his two children, Carl and Lula, but the three men also register additional children, who are either members of their extended family or members of their larger community. These men clearly believed that the advancement of black people was tied to education, and they understood that the progress of the community necessitated that this opportunity be extended to all. Within two years of the 1908 enumeration record, Shadrick has died, and by the time of the 1920 census, Noah and his family are shown living in Winston County, and his oldest son, Carl, has moved to Jasper County. In January of 1920, 76-year-old Hillman was admitted as an "inmate" (U.S. Census Bureau 1920), in what was then named the Mississippi State Insane Asylum: three months later he died, and was buried on those grounds[10]. His body lies among thousands, mostly black, who over a span of decades from the mid 1800s, died at the asylum. The gravesites were discovered in 2012, on grounds that today are part of the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson, Mississippi. The archaeological site that has resulted is now part of The Asylum Hill Project, tasked with respectfully managing the fate of the thousands of remains buried at what is now a planned university construction site[11].

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[9] See *Enumeration of Educable Children Noxubee County, Mississippi. 1908.* "Race Black. Township 13 Range 15". https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:939F-P2WX-6?i=2&wc=M6NC-CMS%3A167442001%2C167441002&cc=1856425.

[10] See MDAH Mississippi Archives Online Catalog. Mississippi Asylum Cemetery Records. Retrieved from http://opac2.mdah.state.ms.us/queries/burials3.php?referer=http%3A%2F%2Fzed.mdah.state.ms.us&searchby=name&sterm=Sistrunk&sortby=certno. See also 1920 United States Census. Mississippi. Hinds County. State Insane Asylum. Township 6 Beat 1.

[11] The discovery of the gravesites garnered considerable attention. The estimated 7000 graves hold the remains of those who died and were buried at what stood as Mississippi's first mental health institute, which opened in 1855 as The Mississippi Lunatic Asylum. Renamed The Mississippi State Insane Hospital in 1900, its doors closed in 1935, and the property is now part of the University of Mississippi Hospital complex. Its first patients were white, and among its earliest was in fact a white woman, Evalina Seastrunk (distant relative of Jacob Sistrunk originating from Georgia), from Copiah County. However, Black people were admitted in increasing numbers by the turn of the century and according to a March19, 2018 article, "Asylum Hill Project: 'What a Great Story this Is", in Univ of Mississippi Medical Center News Stories between 1912 and 1935, black people made up the majority of deaths recorded in the asylum records (https://www.umc.edu/news/News_Articles/2018/03/asylum-hill-project--what-a-great-story-this-is.html). The project's

Hillman's fate is significant because it ties ironically to the isolation that could have easily been the outcome for Francis, who without community would have lived in social isolation as the single enslaved person in Jacob's household. Hillman's fate illustrates, as in the twenty-first century COVID-19 crisis, how easily we can be separated from family, meeting our end alone. It is not necessarily a result of negligence or abandonment on the part of family or loved ones, but can very likely be the result of economic hardships and limited support for health care. When families do not have caretakers at home, or are unable to pay for assistance, and when work and distance prevents them from visiting loved ones when they are confined to living in healthcare facilities, the result can be catastrophic. Hillman's selflessness illustrates the sense of commitment to community and family that Francis instilled in her children. Hillman's story reminds us that, no matter how strong the bonds of family and community that we build and have built, black people in the United States live in a system that continues to leave them at higher risk for life threatening experiences. The Cistrunk migrations from Noxubee County from 1918 to 1920 were likely influenced by a combination of catastrophic events of this two year window: the Red Hot Summer of 1919 that issued in race riots and heightened levels of violence against black people throughout the country; and the flu pandemic of 1918 that left a trail of death throughout the United States, including the south. Perhaps it was the echo of the 1919 riots along with the ongoing push by whites to suppress black voting and economic gains that sparked the violence of 1919 in the city of Macon, in Noxubee County. Tax records show that Cistrunks, like many other black people, were being taxed out of land in Noxubee County, and as well were being charged with poll tax violations—clearly related to the concerted efforts of white southerners to deny black voting[12]. This was a horrible economic, social, and health moment in Noxubee County, perhaps one of the lowest moments in the post-emancipation period of the family. The result was unthinkable for a family and a community that was rooted in beliefs of caring and sacrifice: Hillman, under circumstances that I have not yet fully pieced together, was admitted to an institution where he appears to have died alone, and was buried without family, without memorial, without recognition of a life that mattered.

Like his siblings, Hillman was a manifestation of his mother's teachings, his mother's ethos. While Hillman died alone, the line of descent from his brother, John, lives today in Mississippi and other states in the nation. John's children's children and their descendants survived because Hillman assumed a responsibility for them and others in his community. In the absence of his brother, he became the father and assumed responsibility for his grandson's care. His life emphasizes the importance of black women's spiritual centeredness as key to maintaining a generational ideology of belonging among black people. Stories of the thousands buried on the grounds of today's University of Mississippi Medical Center are yet to be told. The Asylum Hill Project was established to oversee the respectful reinternment of remains, and to unearth the history of their lives and experiences in the asylum. Hillman's story is among those, but with no living direct descendants, his is a story that would have probably been lost but for the evidence of their existence mapped out by his mother, Francis, and her sons, and Francis' self-declared namesake.

The family's split seems to have occurred between the offspring of John and Shadrick. During the brothers' lives, however, they seemed to have worked together to seat themselves and family into their community and to find financial stability. The brothers would follow their mother's example in exercising the power of naming: they would declare their identity and independence

website, asylumhillproject.org, provides a history of the asylum and the present archaeological project undertaken to provide greater historical context and to honorably handle the thousands of human remains.

12 The following articles exemplify the looming and implemented tax threats that pervaded the lives of Cistrunk landowners in Noxubee County in the first decades of the twentieth century: *Macon Beacon*. Macon, Mississippi. Fri, 06 May 1910 Page 4. Delinquent Poll Tax; *Macon Beacon*. Macon, Mississippi. Fri, 29 Apr 1910 Page 4. Delinquent Poll Tax List; *Macon Beacon*. Macon, Mississippi. Sat, 23 Mar 1901 Page 1. John on Delinquent Poll Tax list; *Macon Beacon*. Macon, Mississippi. Fri, 24 Feb 1911 Page 5. Shederick Sistrunk Trustee Sale; *Macon Beacon*. Macon, Mississippi. Fri, 10 Mar 1911 Page 8. Shed Cistrunk Sale of Land for Delinquent Taxes; *Macon Beacon*. Macon, Mississippi. Fri, 03 May 1912 Page 3. Doss Cistrunk Delinquent Poll Tax: *Macon Beacon*. Macon, Mississippi. Fri, 06 Oct 1911 Page 8. Susan Cistrunk Citation.

from their white enslavers, signaling their rebirth into the community of freed people. The present day Cistrunk descendants of Francis' son, Shadrick, pass on the family's historical account of this change in the spelling of their surname. According to this story, in the years after emancipation, the black Sistrunks would regularly receive their mail late, because the postman would deliver all mail addressed to Sistrunks to the households of white Sistrunks. The black Sistrunks—John, Hillman, and Shadrick—changed the spelling to distinguish themselves from the white Sistrunks, and thus to subvert this practice of censorship. The transition is evident in the 1876 deed record, that shows the change to Scistrunk as the new spelling. Subsequently, on the 1880 Census and other deed transactions we find Hillman and his brothers spelling their surname, Cistrunk, thereby dropping the S, and clearly instituting the new spelling that has passed on into this line of descent today.

By naming Shad after his biological father, Francis preserves for Shad and his descendants their connection to black ancestral origins. Although Shad's descendants to date convey a family history that points to his son, Noah, as patriarch and early ancestor, Francis, left markers that show her as the foreparent who planted the seeds of home and community for generations of Cistrunks in Mississippi. It is not clear why the story of Shadrick, his siblings, and their mother, Francis, did not survive at the forefront in the oral narrative of the Noah Cistrunk line of descent. The silencing of Francis, and to a lesser extent Shadrick, may have been the desire for those born post emancipation to sever ties to a history that connected their origins to slavery. Francis survived this erasure, however, because generations of her female descendants have quietly spoken her name. I learnt from women descendants of Noah Cistrunk that it was Francis' granddaughter, Sophie (Noah's sister), who passed down the story of her grandmother, Francis. Sophie lived 30 years after her brother's death in 1937, and while she outlived her own children, she shared the family's history with Noah's children. Because women usually care for the aged in the family, as Sophie became older, it was the women who primarily heard the accounts of the family that she shared. Remarkably, in death, Sophie leaves an indelible connection to the nineteenth-century Cistrunk matriarch, Francis. While her family had always referred to her as Sophie, between the 1930 and 1940 census, Sophie had remarried, moved to Jackson and assumed the name Francis (U.S. Census Bureau 1940), and this would be the name of record on her death certificate and obituary in 1967. While census records from her childhood into adult life identified her by the name Sophie, she may have, from birth, been given the second name of Francis at birth. African Americans have generationally maintained the common place Central African practice of naming children after grandparents (Thornton 1993, p. 742). It seems that Sophie entered into a new life with the move to Jackson, and she signaled this by a name change. Her family continued to refer to her as Sophie, but in spaces beyond her family circle, she was Francis. Her navigation of a public and a private name is not out of line with a generations-old practice in African and African diasporic societies, where many individuals assume multiple names (López 2015, pp. 161–63). This change to Francis is a declaration of identity and lineage, and stands today as perhaps Sophie may have intended: to pass on and secure the place of her grandmother, Francis, as foreparent—matriarch—to her family's line of descent. Recognizing Francis as such broadens the narrative of the Cistrunks and their place in the originating community of freed black people in Noxubee County.

Shadrick's son, Noah, would remain in Noxubee County until he moved his family to neighboring Winston County, sometime between the years 1910 and 1918. This move, however, did not uproot Noah from his Noxubee roots. Throughout his life, Noah maintained connections to the Noxubee community where his father Shadrick, and his grandmother, Francis, had planted roots after the Civil War. The poignant symbol of this connectedness was his continued membership at Brushfork Baptist Church, his home church in Noxubee, where his remains would be returned for burial in 1937. To this date, Noah's last surviving son, B___ Cistrunk, and other descendants, tell the story of Noah's legacy in this community. Descendants from John's line still live in Noxubee County to date, but with Noah's relocation of his family, Shadrick's line was transplanted to Winston County. Today, his descendants identify Winston County as the point of their ancestral home. In both counties, however, we see through Francis' descendants the embodiment of her living legacy. Some are still landowners,

continuing the legacy of a rootedness in the land, and in both counties, the black Cistrunk presence and history live also in the naming of roads in both counties that bear the name Cistrunk[13].

The narrative of Francis Sistrunk that has emerged from this study is a remarkable legacy for her descendants, as it shows that not only was Francis the architect of their family's place in the early freed community of Noxubee County Blacks, but that their Mississippi origins story predates the patriarchal first generation free born descendant, Noah (her grandson). The import of Francis' narrative, however, extends beyond her own descendants. Her story represents that of countless black women, many unnamed, who similarly planted the seeds of kinship and community for their families pre and post-Civil War. In the seeming simple but deeply spiritual act of naming, Francis imparted to her descendants the power of self and communal actualization, representing a proclamation of autonomy and identity that remains a practice among African Americans to date.

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[13] In Winston County, in the area where Noah and his family lived and farmed, there is a road named Bill Cistrunk, in honor of Noah's son, Bill. In Noxubee County, in the area where the three Cistrunk brothers, John, Hillman, and Shadrick, owned land and farmed, there is a u-shaped road named Cistrunk.

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