

Salem State University  
The Graduate School  
Department of English

Traumatic Dualities: Religion and Recovery in African-American Women's Writing

A Thesis in English  
by  
Althea Terenzi  
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

August 2015

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## Introduction

In one scene from Paule Marshall's 1983 novel *Praisesong for the Widow*, protagonist Avey Johnson recalls being admonished for dancing during a Ring Shout at her Southern church. After challenging her fellow parishioners, "Hadn't David danced before the Lord?" and being ejected from the ceremony, her sense of injustice causes her to abandon church altogether and pursue instead the rituals and lore of her African ancestors. Still, she sometimes nostalgically stands outside her old church to look in on women and men during worship. The woman is torn between two traditions, the Christian one embraced by so many African Americans and the West African tradition that she needs to feel spiritually whole.

Avey's experience is one that appears in different shapes in African American women's fiction, which often deals with the psychic and spiritual pain that can result from possessing dual cultural identities. Figuring strongly in cultural identity, matters of religion are also a frequent feature of such texts. In the three novels I discuss, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) by Marshall, *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison, and *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker, characters experience spiritual ruptures in addition to other traumas. Both trauma and religion permeate much of the criticism of these works. Surprisingly little of the criticism, however, goes into any depth on the mingling, layering, contrasting, and comparing of various religious elements the authors employ and their relationship to trauma. For each novel, I consider how religion and the sacred are used in nuanced ways that indicate courses toward spiritual reconciliation and recovery.

Regarding how religion is treated in the abundance of scholarship on each of these texts, spiritual elements including ritual and myth are often analyzed concurrently with Afrocentric

themes. Recentring the discourse away from dominantly white ideology is the main intention here, and is especially relevant given the novels' historical context on the heels of the Black Arts Movement. Concerned exclusively with the black experience including language, settings, and customs, the Black Aesthetic and those writers attuned to it even after the movement faded--writers like Marshall, Morrison, and Walker-- celebrated black folk heritage. Critics sympathetic to the Black Arts Movement, therefore, approach texts from perspectives minoritized in Western culture and in "the academy," and their evaluations of the religious components in the works discussed in this paper eschew traditional readings by highlighting African cosmology, mythology, and ritual instead of drawing connections to Judeo-Christian theology.<sup>1</sup> One such Afrocentric reading of African religion in these texts is Theresa N. Washington's analysis of the Yoruba concept of Àjé to characterize mother-daughter relationships in *Beloved*. Also, Mawuena Logan uncovers the sources of many African religious allusions made in *Praisesong*. In contrast are readings that access the texts from entirely Western perspectives, interpreting spiritual elements in relation to biblical myth or Christian values, for example. Among such readings are Nancy B. Bate's article on *Beloved* as a retelling of the Jewish Haggadah. Few critics, however, attend to the religious synchresis that arises from these texts that employ diverse spiritual traditions. Dorothy Hamer Denniston, for example, does perform a reading of Marshall's novel that takes into account the author's use of both Christian and African religious symbolism. Bicultural readings of religion in these texts are uncommon.

The topic of trauma is woven throughout the literature on these novels that portray struggle and tragedy in the lives of black women. Their individual experiences vary: Avey

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Christian is perhaps the most outspoken on the need for marginalized perspectives to be heard. See "The Race for Theory," for example.

undergoes a cultural identity crisis; Sethe of *Beloved* is a former slave who has committed infanticide; and Celie in *The Color Purple* is raped and abused. Underlying each of these circumstances, however, is the trauma of enduring a racist and patriarchal American society. For this reason, the criticism on trauma in these works largely examines feminist and racial themes. Black feminist scholar Candice Jenkins, for example, considers how Walker's novel functions to disrupt black patriarchal structures by deconstructing the black family romance. Also, Christopher Lewis argues that Walker challenges the marginalization of women during the Black Pride movement in her articulation of a queer sexuality that cultivates shamelessness in the face of patriarchal and heteronormative paradigms. Susan Willis views *Praisesong for the Widow* as a story about overcoming trauma through accessing the history of black people in the New World. For *Beloved*, discourse on trauma centers around slavery and the deep psychological pain suffered by the protagonist and the African American community as a whole. As illustration, Roxanne Reed contends that sound is a catalyst for personal and communal salvation in the black experience.

Many of the ideas expressed in readings of trauma in these novels are informed either explicitly or indirectly by W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness, a psycho-social conflict experienced by many black Americans, and the theory of cultural trauma propounded by sociologists like Ron Eyerman.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that the traumas located in these texts' black woman protagonists are more generally traumas of oppression and social division. Denise Heinze's work addresses African-American double-consciousness, contending that although the struggle for psychic wholeness is not always resolved, it may be transcended by drawing

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<sup>2</sup> Examples include Denise Heinze's work on double-consciousness in Toni Morrison's writing and Willis' article, which deals with cultural trauma in Marshall's novel.

connections between cultures rather than attempting to eliminate or deny differences. Objecting to the idea that diasporic identity has rooted or fixed origins, Carissa Turner Smith offers that, in addition to identifying with one's roots, "routes" of cultural exchange or hybridity are crucial to identity formation for diasporic subjects. But Susan Willis suggests that figurative cultural journeys back to Africa, through ritual for example, can help in regaining a sense of wholeness and communal solidarity. While there is some contention in the literature about whether trauma is effectively surmounted by recovering a more purely African cultural identity, there is widespread agreement that the characters lack of wholeness and must somehow reconcile divisions within the self and their communities.

At the interface of trauma and religion is fertile ground for literary analysis. Some critics have addressed relationships between the texts' religious components and trauma, like Barbara Christian, who considers the power of African spiritual rituals to recover from what can be traumatic diasporic experience ("Ritualistic Process"). My intervention addresses both these authors' use of diverse religious traditions and their depictions of trauma. I was interested in the interplay of Western and West African spiritual elements and wondered what these religious integrations had to say relative to trauma. For each novel, I examine the intersections of trauma and the use of diverse religious allusions.

In the first part of my discussion I argue that Paule Marshall syncretizes religions as a pathway to overcoming trauma. *Praisesong for the Widow* dramatizes the impacts of the Middle Passage on generations of black people and the spiritually corrupting influence of assimilation to white society. Without polarizing black and white, Marshall's narrative operates in cycles that mimic the cultural fluctuation that has become an ingrained part of the African American

experience, what is best described as Du Boisian double-consciousness, a state of being in which one is both immersed in and torn by two distinct social identities. I further consider Marshall's uses of primarily religious imagery in her cultural exploration: churches, Christian sermons, Gula rituals, African ring dances, ancient legends, baptisms, rebirths, saints and orishas. Through these, her protagonist rediscovers her heritage, establishes a positive, black self-image, and reorders her racial consciousness. Marshall's double allusions, ambiguous spiritual references that may pertain to either tradition, African or Christian, or extend from one another, serve to demonstrate the interrelation of these traditions and offer an alternative to the inclination to choose one or another cultural identity.

My approach to *Beloved* begins with an examination of the links between the individual traumas of its characters and the cultural traumas inflicted by slavery on African Americans. *Beloved's* characters represent the struggle for black Americans, and whites as well, to reconcile issues of identity, history, and cultural heritage to make space for acknowledging and confronting the ugliness of the past and allow for healing and growth. I contend that Morrison employs the sacred in the novel to illustrate a way toward healing. Much of the criticism pertaining to religion and spirituality in *Beloved* is monocultural, focusing on either Christian or West African beliefs. While it uncovers obscure allusions in the text and brings African influences to the forefront, such criticism nevertheless falls short of *Beloved's* overall vision of reconciling cultural trauma. The way in which we read the sacred in the novel impacts its very efficacy as a testimonial of cultural and spiritual wholeness. Readings that fail to recognize Morrison's religious syncretism, inadvertently or not, reassert dominant ideologies and perpetuate racial and cultural divisions. In approaching the sacred in *Beloved*, it is important to

give due attention to the ways in which the author carefully overlays and navigates between religions, for it is in the multicultural dimension of sacred that Morrison offers collective recovery.

In chapter three I take up Walker's own challenge to view spirituality as the central idea of *The Color Purple* and to distinguish between what she calls "god image" and god. Despite her 2006 introduction to the novel that makes this distinction and bemoans its absence in critical discourse about her work, the topic has not since been broached in any depth. Here, I look at Walker's treatment of Christianity and African religion and find a rejection of both. Unlike *Beloved* and *Praisesong*, which appear to call for certain integrations of religious traditions as a way forward in reconciling trauma, *The Color Purple* sets forth the proposition to abandon any religious establishment that mediates god and the individual. Such mediation, which inherently subjugates individuals and operates through oppressive structures such as church or tribe, results in the perpetuation of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Walker's novel suggests that the individual, therefore, must shun the god images presented by established religions and experience god directly in the self and all things in order to surmount the traumas of dominance and oppression.

Throughout each of the texts, *Beloved*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, and *The Color Purple*, women and men undergo unspeakable pain that has arisen directly or indirectly from white supremacy and the slave trade. The lingering scars on the spirit are a reality still, inscribed on black experience. These novels do not proselytize religion as salvation; rather, they explore realms of the sacred, poking around in the hidden recesses of the collective black consciousness, and offer new approaches to spiritual recovery.

## Spiritual Reworkings of the Dilemma of Double-Consciousness in Paule Marshall's

### *Praisesong for the Widow*

Sitting there staring at the closed garage door you are reminded that a friend once told you there exists the medical term-- John Henryism-- for people exposed to stresses stemming from racism. They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the buildup of erasure. Sherman James, the researcher who came up with the term, claimed the physiological costs were high. You hope by sitting in silence you are bucking that trend.

-- Claudia Rankine  
*Citizen: An American Lyric*

Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) is particularly illustrative of W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of double-consciousness described in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Du Bois famously depicts this traumatic cognitive dissonance as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, -- an American, a Negro" (3). He recounts his own sensation of double-consciousness as stemming from a boyhood experience in which he was snubbed by a white classmate, a sudden realization that "the worlds I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs [white people's], not mine" and were separated from him by "a vast veil" (2). Paule Marshall's work dramatizes the dilemma of double-consciousness in Avey Johnson, a widow who struggles to find her place in white-dominated society. Unlike Du Bois, however, who had "no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through" (2), much of Avey's life is spent living on the other side of veil, assimilating to white society in pursuit of "success." Literally keeping a stiff upper lip (into which she tucks what she perceives to be her too-black lower lip), Avey suppresses feelings of

double-consciousness, a split between her identities as a woman with African and West Indian roots and as a black member of her dominantly white American society.

Marshall's narrative fluctuates between past and present, mimicking the many circular journeys present in the novel. Avey does not experience most of these journeys, however, as circular in a manner that encompasses the entirety of her sociocultural identities. Instead, Avey experiences them as breaches in her identity that perpetuate double-consciousness. For example, Avey is raised alternately by her parents in New York and by an ancestor, her Aunt Cuney, in Tatem, South Carolina. These are mutually exclusive in her mind; with Cuney she is submerged in her heritage and Gullah<sup>3</sup> culture, while with her parents she is encouraged to forsake heritage in order to climb socially in a racist society. But Marshall does not paint the pictures of Tatem and New York in black and white, even as Avey views them this way. Marshall carefully constructs her settings in various hues of gray. The reader sees, for instance, that Gullah culture is suffused with Western tradition and that in New York there is still great desire to celebrate black heritage. Avey's tendency to regard the cultures as antithetical, opposing forces within herself is the root of her double-consciousness and psychological trauma. The result is code-switching, isolation, low self-esteem, and latent fear.

In discussing Avey's trauma and journey in relation to Du Boisian double-consciousness, I will consider Marshall's depictions of religions, both explicit and subtextual, and what these suggest in terms of resolving double-consciousness. Critics have noted protagonist Avey Johnson's psychological and cultural trauma and the healing powers of returning to her rich

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<sup>3</sup> The Gullah are a people descended from slaves living in the Lowcountry of South Carolina and Georgia.

cultural heritage.<sup>4</sup> Because the subject of religious belief and practice in this novel is synonymous with that of culture, any discussion of cultural trauma must include religion. Adding to the discussion of *Praisesong* as a mythic odyssey, often described as the Middle Passage in reverse, I investigate how Avey's cyclical navigations of sacred domains, and even her attempts at skirting of those domains, relates directly to her journey toward wholeness.

In *Praisesong*, Marshall approaches religion not as a mode of recovery but as illustration of how two (and more) cultures might be reconciled in the individual. The larger narrative in which Avey has spontaneously disembarked a cruiseship to explore Grenada and the smaller island of Carriacou is interspersed with flashbacks to others of Avey's travels during which she fails to find spiritual wholeness. In these past journeys, it is not religion, per se, at issue, although they are infused with spiritual and religious elements that Avey has a hard time reckoning. Nor does finally immersing herself in the religion of her ancestors on Carriacou offer salvation for a spirit traumatically torn in two. Marshall, through Avey, considers the intersections of cultures and religions and points to multiculturalism as an approach to resolving the double-consciousness that ensues from viewing various parts of one's cultural identity as disparate. By the end of the cruise, Avey adopts a new consciousness that integrates and affirms her dual identities.

The real journey in the novel, then, is a search for remedy for, or at least reconciliation of, traumatic double-consciousness in a "fastidiously bourgeois African American widow in the twilight of her life" (Bell 267) who, having achieved her conception of the American Dream,

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<sup>4</sup> See Susan Willis, "Describing Arcs of Recovery"; also, Ann Armstrong Scarborough, who has discovered a six-element paradigm for Avey's psychological journey, and Elizabeth McNeil's explication of the novel as Gullah initiation ritual.

realizes relatively late in life the cost of her material success. Her disconnect from the African culture she was more in touch with in her young life, compiled with her disconnect from the mostly white society of the middle class suburb to which she aspired, confronts her in the form of dreams and physical symptoms aboard the cruise ship, aptly named the *Bianca* [White] *Pride*. It is a spiritual dis-ease that compels Avey to disembark at Grenada, and a subconscious desire to reconnect with her forsaken African culture that drives her to Carriacou for the festival. On Carriacou, amongst a community of black people reminiscent of Aunt Cuney, Avey finally embraces the cultural heritage she had disavowed in favor of assimilation with white America. Barbara Christian notes that “Marshall’s entire opus focuses on the consciousness of black people as they remember, retain, develop their sense of spiritual/sensual integrity and individual selves, against the materialism that characterizes American societies,” and how “a visceral understanding of their history and rituals can help black people transcend their displacement and retain their wholeness” (“Ritualistic Process” 74). The full circle Avey makes in both her physical and spiritual journeys represent the wholeness she comes to find after such a visceral understanding is achieved.

Avey’s voyage between America, the Caribbean, and Africa (represented by the Afro-centric island of Carriacou) evokes the Middle Passage, thus connecting Avey with the history of her ancestors, but the circuit she travels is more than historical; it also connotes the deep cultural impact of the Middle Passage on slaves and their descendents. Marshall manifests the cultural here primarily as the religious. Several critics have pointed out the connections to

traditional African religion and culture in the novel, including mythology, dance, and music.<sup>5</sup> Helen Pyne Timothy and others have discussed the coexistence of both Christianity and African religion in the novel. The critical consensus is that as Avey proceeds and recedes into her past, she moves toward a traditional African spirituality with the ability to heal her identity fragmentation. It is important, however, to appreciate the richness in Marshall's treatment of religion and consider the ways in which she refuses to champion one religious tradition over any other. On the contrary, Paule Marshall shows how a blended, hybrid spirituality is what allows Avey to resolve her trauma.

On Tatem Island in South Carolina where she visited every summer as a girl, Avey connects with African tradition and spirituality through her great-great-aunt. Cuney is an ancestor figure who actively encouraged Avey to appreciate her African heritage by employing African oral tradition to convey stories and legends and taking Avey to sacred sites. Avey, short for Avatara, inherited her name from Cuney's grandmother, who, according to legend, watched a group of Ibo disembark from a slave ship only to turn around and walk on the water back to Africa. Avatara then "picked herself up and took off after 'em. In her mind" (Marshall 39). Carissa Turner Smith writes, "the original Avatara represents the spiritual agency that still remained strong in enslaved African Americans, in spite of their physical confinement" (716). Cuney relays the story of the Ibos to Avey on bi-weekly pilgrimages to Ibo Landing, the site of the legendary event. At the age of ten, however, Avey expresses suspicion in her aunt's

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Keith Cartwright explores voodoo religion and Creole music in the novel, Rebecca S. Miller examines Marshall's use of Quadrille music and dance, and Mawuena Logan undertakes tracing African religious allusions to their sources.

incarnation of the “Flying Africans” legend<sup>6</sup> when she questioned the story, asking how the Ibo did not drown. She is rebuffed by Cuney who asks, “Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday School book your momma always sends with you?”(40). Here, a conflict is both established and negated. On one hand is Cuney’s frustration that Avey dares question one set of beliefs while taking for granted as true hegemonic Christian doctrine. Additionally, Cuney implies that Avey’s mother has armed the child with scripture as an answer to the “heathen” stories of the aunt. And yet this interaction also establishes similarities between two mythologies, and in Cuney’s mind believing in one story should facilitate, or indeed necessitate, belief in the other rather than discount it. The incident of Avey’s questioning also establishes a pattern in Avey’s life to come; perhaps like her mother, Avey feels she must choose one culture over another. This is the initial glimpse at Avey’s developing double-consciousness, as she struggles to reconcile her Africanness, represented by Cuney, with her Americanness, represented by her urban life in Harlem.

In Harlem, Avey is less in touch with her African heritage. Given her mother’s disapproval of Cuney’s folklore in favor of conservative Christianity, together with the economic and social demands of city living that detach her from the nature that abounds in Tatem, Avey’s cultural link to Africa is decidedly weakened. Once a year, Avey’s parents take a boat ride up the Hudson river with hundreds of black people, an annual excursion that reconnects the African American community. The need to leave the shores of New York is telling of a perceived difference between blacks and their surroundings, a feeling of isolation, a need to escape to

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<sup>6</sup> According to Daryl Cumber Dance, accounts of the Ibo or “other discontented slaves” walking or flying back to Africa. In addition to Marshall’s allusion to the mythic motif, Dance cites lore collected by Elliott P. Skinner in *Drums and Shadows* (1972): “Den dey rise off duh groun an fly away. Nobody ebuh see um no mo. Some say dey fly back tuh Africa. Muh gran see dat wid he own eye” (Dance 598).

spiritually re-energize. Such a thing is not necessary in Tatem, where the black community is apparently already at home with itself. This excursion on the Hudson, which parallels Avey's summer excursions to Tatem in their cyclical nature and immersion in black culture, provides another opportunity for Avey to reconcile with her heritage and blackness and clear up feelings of traumatic cultural fissure. But although Avey remembers the trips up the river fondly as an adult, their spiritual and communal potential is lost on her at the time.

Avey eventually marries Jay Johnson, who helps to anchor Avey in African American culture for a time through what Barbara Christian calls "ritualistic process," engaging in rituals involving music, physicality, and religion. They struggle financially, but their relationship is initially strong, though Avey is unsatisfied. She tries to miscarry her third child out of financial stress, which slowly manifests as paranoia that Jay is sleeping with white women. At the intersection of poverty and racism, Avey is spiritually desolated. She recalls nightmares from that period wherein "images from the evening news" encroached on her sleep:

The electric cattle prods and lunging dogs. The high pressure hoses that were like a dam bursting. The lighted cigarettes being ground out on the arms of those sitting in at the lunch counters. Her dreams were a rerun of it all. The bomb that exploded in the Sunday School quiet of Birmingham in '63 went off a second time in her sleep several nights later. (Marshall 31)

Avey's nightmares are a legacy of African American oppression and suffering, a subconscious struggle to find her place in history and in the community. Rather than engage in that struggle, though, Avey ceases to dream entirely for decades. Yet her fears of social oppression resurface aboard the cruise in the form of hallucinations of a shuffleboard game turning into a brawl. A

memory of witnessing with Jay a black man being beaten by police is immediately triggered, “the sound of some blunt instrument repeatedly striking human flesh and bone...*Unable either of them to go back to sleep afterwards, she and Jay had sat up the rest of the night till dawn, like two people holding a wake*” (56). Her feelings of guilt about abandoning her people are palpable here, as the couple has chosen to leave Harlem for the fittingly named North *White* Plains. Avey often perceives what Du Bois calls “two-ness” (3) about situations, for example in her sense of Tatem versus Harlem, or the Ibo versus Jesus. Regarding her life in Harlem, Avey has again reduced her situation to binary choices; in her mind, it is either become like her downtrodden neighbors or enter the world of the white upper middle class. Of the former choice, Christian writes, “Ironically, in trying to avoid such fate, [Jay] and Avey commit a kind of spiritual suicide, for they give up their music, heritage, sensuality, their expression of themselves” and that “In accepting and achieving the American dream, they dishonor themselves” as black (“Ritualistic Process” 77). Avey’s material dissatisfaction combined with a fear of physical oppression compels her to cut loose from her roots altogether. This clumsy attempt at resolving double-consciousness haunts her and will ultimately be the thing she must reckon with. In North White Plains, New York, she acculturates like her friends to the white middle class, but thinks often of her old neighbors and the early phases of her marriage in Harlem. Thus, Avey’s identity becomes fragmented into the here and there, past and present, old world and new world, the mainstream of urban America and the eccentric/other of old Cuney. This double-consciousness is the source of Avey’s spiritual trauma.

It is Cuney’s own biography that shows an alternative to this fragmenting mode of thinking. As a girl, Cuney attended Ring Shouts at church until her tendency to meld the African

with the Christian became too conspicuous for conventional churchgoers to accept.<sup>7</sup> Whereas in a Ring Shout, in keeping with conservative Protestant prohibitions, one would suppress the desire to dance, keeping the feet almost constantly on the floor and shuffling around the ring (Dance 532), Cuney was caught “crossing her feet” (Marshall 33). She quoted scripture in her own defense: “‘Hadn’t David danced before the Lord?’” Cuney understands spiritually and intellectually the parallels between the Christian and the culture of her heritage, but such connections are not tolerated by institutions or general society, even by other African Americans. Furthermore, she intuited that the rituals of African American Christian worship are suffused with something much older. Cuney eventually leaves the church, having “made the Landing her religion after that” (34). Unlike Avey who sees in terms of conflicting binaries, Cuney sees continuity and overlap even as she is compelled to choose sides. Cuney thus represents a melding of belief systems that is successful, if not in the eyes of society than at least in the individual who would feel otherwise divided. She becomes a model for Avey of a person who can sustain double-consciousness with internal harmony, even if it means walking away from mainstream (dominant) affiliations.

Some critics view Cuney’s abandonment of the church as a sign the novel’s Africanist themes. Alder Senior Grant’s essay on identity and Paule Marshall’s heroines, for example, posits that Marshall uses African mythology to disrupt Western norms and “manifests not only her discomfort with the dominant patriarchal ideology but also a firm intention to transgress imposed boundaries” (34). I argue that while certainly Marshall wants to establish a firm place for African tradition in the lives of the African diaspora, it is not at the expense of the place

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<sup>7</sup> The irony here is that the Ring Shout itself is rooted in African religious practice, “a relic of native African dance” according to Daryl Cumber Dance (532-3).

Christianity also holds in the diaspora. Rather, I agree with Carissa Turner Smith's assertion that Marshall evokes the continuity between Africa and the West. The author's tone toward the Christian aspects of the characters' lives is not condescending and does not support the absolutist interpretation Grant puts forth. The image of Cuney standing across from the church in her later years, "unreconciled" (Marshall 34) in the sense that she has not rejoined the parish but "nostalgic" for its place in her heart, is evidence of a certain loss.

Many times in the novel, Marshall reminds readers that retreat to one's origins is neither simple nor wholly possible, that it is more productive to recognize culture as continuous than an artifact of a lost time or place. In relation to Avey's childhood with Cuney, for instance, it is noteworthy that Avey takes a mini-odyssey in Tatem that is a presage to her cruise experience many years later and that also represents routes of spirituality described by Smith. Marshall describes a set of landmarks Cuney and Avey pass on the way to Ibo Landing that take on symbolic significance. The starting point is the Baptist church, followed by the home of "Doctor" Benitha Grant, herbalist, marking a symbolic move in their journey from the formal or institutional to the homeopathic or alternative. Next is Pharo Harris and Miss Celia, who have in their front yard heaps of rusting equipment leftover from the days of sharecropping. The couple spend their time gardening in the back. This home represents another aspect of African American history and life, living with the remnants of slavery, represented by the farming tools, but choosing to focus on the future and growth, represented by their garden. The next landmark is Mr. Golla Mack, an old blind man "immune to time," who represents the Ancestor in his other-worldliness, "scarcely seem[ing] a living living breathing man, ordinary flesh and blood" (36). His name alone evokes the Gullah, who were incredibly successful at preserving their

African linguistic and cultural heritage. Beyond him is a “a vast denuded tract of land that had once, more than a century ago, been the largest plantation of sea island cotton thereabouts,” a reference to slavery, and beyond that a dense forest. Here, Avey and Cuney cross a river to Ibo Landing, where “Tatem met up with the open sea” (37). It is here that Cuney tells the story of the Ibos, symbolically bringing their journey in time and space back to the coast of Africa. To recap, they have gone from the Protestant Church to sharecropping, to slavery, to the kidnapping of African men and women: a trip backward in time. Lest we interpret the journey as purely pro-Africanism, Marshall reminds us that it is not a one-way route; the women see each landmark in reverse on the way home, and complete this loop twice a week. The impression left is acknowledgment of history, respect for the ancestors, and appreciation for the connectedness and continuity that remains.

Avey remains unconscious of this impression during her time in Tatem and much of her adult life, as she misinterprets the excursions and thus her heritage as something that has been lost, that she could be guided to but is personally disconnected from. For Avey, the religion of her great-aunt and that of her family in New York are distinct and independent, though Marshall makes it clear to the more objective reader that Avey has missed an important point; Avey feels lost because she has failed to understand the nature of time, space, and culture as tightly interwoven. The Ibos’ walking on water and the Ring Shouts allow Marshall early in the novel to connect, in Smith’s words, “diasporic identity” and “sacred narrative of the Christian tradition” (723). Smith shows in her essay how discovering a true spiritual origin, one’s religious *roots*, is impossible, but that it is both possible and compelling to instead trace religious

routes.<sup>8</sup> *Praisesong for the Widow* exemplifies her theory. In Marshall's depiction of Avey, writes Smith, "Marshall does not reject Christianity as the religion of the oppressors, nor does she take the accommodationist approach of giving thanks that she was taken from Africa so that she could be introduced to the Christian God. Instead, Marshall's Avey experiences diasporic religion in more complex ways" (723). The narrative layer involving Cuney provides an important basis for this supposition. Viewing spiritual traditions in terms of binaries diminishes the complexity of African American religious life and inhibits any sense of wholeness.

The double-consciousness Avey experiences drives her to pursue a bourgeois life free of racial scrutiny, but her salvific wish<sup>9</sup> only deepens the spiritual rift within her. She and husband Jay leave Harlem after the stresses of poverty and family life lead to a screaming match during which they shame themselves by acting like the neighbors they had always felt superior to. They not only leave their black community behind, perceived by Avey as "an act of betrayal" (122), but they give up the rituals that link them to their ancestors and each other: poems about the Euphrates, gospel music, and coupling likened to worship of African deities.<sup>10</sup> Upon arrival in North White Plains, Jay is anxious to make his new identity visible by adopting the more formal

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<sup>8</sup> Carissa Turner Smith's article directly questions Paul E. Gilroy's premise in *The Black Atlantic* that associates "both women and religion exclusively with static "roots," as opposed to dynamic "routes" (715), taking issue with what she sees as ethnic absolutism. She points to complex expressions of Africanist culture in literature, and in *Praisesong*, "The diverse expressions of African American spirituality in the South and outside it, demonstrate a flexibility that Gilroy refuses to attribute to roots" (727). For example, Jay's links to black spirituality "are mediated through their Christian heritage" (726). Working off of her argument, I offer that like Lebert Joseph who lists African peoples in order to discover which Avey identifies with and is willing to accommodate for any of them, Marshall presents allusions to a host religious beliefs and rituals, Christian and African. As I will show, her depiction of Christianity is not monolithic, and neither is her depiction of African religion. Furthermore, the two are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>9</sup> Candice Jenkins coined to phrase "salvific wish" to describe "an aspiration, most often but not only middle-class and female, to save or rescue the black community from white racist accusations of sexual and domestic pathology, through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety" (973).

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Christian's "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*" goes into depth on the origins of Avey and Jay's private rituals.

name Jerome and by shaving his signature mustache. Avey, disquieted by the changes, relates, “On occasion, glancing at him, she would surprise what almost looked like the vague, pale outline of another face superimposed on his, as in a double exposure” (131). This passage echoes Avey’s out-of-body experience on the cruise ship when she does not recognize herself in the mirror and her memories of similar incidents when she sizes up the sensibly-dressed black woman who “was clearly someone who kept her thoughts and feelings to herself,” never recognizing that it was her own reflection (48). Like Jerome, who had taken to criticizing black people, Avey seems barely conscious of herself as black, having taken on a persona similar to one of the many white, bourgeois passengers of the *Bianca Pride*. Susan Willis writes that, when Avey is later confronted in her dreams by her dead husband, she “realize[s] that their journey up the social ladder coincided with their having lost or forsaken the Afro-American cultural heritage that had once filled their life with music and dance” (61). Along with the habit of tucking in her large lower lip, Avey stifles her values and African spirituality for the sake of her and Jay’s salvific wish.

The failure to see worth beyond bourgeois sensibility in their life together is a great source of Avey’s simmering trauma. Only later on Grenada does Avey come to understand what was wasted:

Something vivid and affirming and charged with feeling had been present in the small rituals that had once shaped their lives... Moreover (and again she only sensed this in the dimmest way), something in those small rites, an ethos they held in common, had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay’s to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible. (137)

Discussing Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, Christian points out that the need for black people to thrive in America and maintain black identity should not be seen as mutually exclusive ("Ritualistic Process" 78). Unable to see these two needs as interrelated leads to a double-consciousness that Jay and Avey cannot abide, thus they squelch one in the service of the other. Morrison herself recognizes the "press toward upward social mobility" that leads many African Americans to disavow their culture that has been "discredited" by white people ("Rootedness" 342). The answer suggested in *Praisesong* is a reassessment of the American Dream and a reconstruction of that dream wherein a black spirituality can remain intact. Avey's thoughts here attest to spiritual chasm created when one forsakes cultural heritage in striving for social gain.

Having confronted her spiritual crisis in her hotel room on Grenada and grieving for the loss of her husband and cultural heritage, Avey's new challenge is to find a way to reconnect. With the ancestral figure of Cuney dead, Avey might be permanently adrift spiritually if it were not for vivid dreams of her aunt. Toni Morrison describes distinctive elements of African American writing, one of which is the presence of an ancestor: "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" ("Rootedness" 343). The importance of the ancestor figure has already been well documented in relation to *Praisesong*. Elizabeth McNeil, for example, outlines the novel as a Gullah initiation journey in which Aunt Cuney is Avey's spiritual guide. Barbara Christian describes Cuney and Lebert Joseph, who Avey meets on Grenada, as "Old Parents" who are able "to go beyond gender and conflict to something deeper, more essential" (79), citing androgynous

traits of both characters. Furthermore, notes Christian, the elders of West Africa are believed to be able to interpret dreams, which Lebert Joseph does for Avey when he first meets her. With Cuney pushing her from the back-- her past-- and Lebert pulling her forward to accompany him on an excursion to Carriacou for its annual religious festival, the Big Drum, they succeed in bringing Avey face to face with her heritage, which provides the wisdom she needs to confront and heal her brokenness for the future.

Lebert Joseph, sensing Avey's spiritual unease, almost immediately compels her to pick up the thread of her heritage and restore her cultural identity. He inquires about her ethnicity, listing Chamba, Manding, Temne, Banda, and others while "Each one made her head ache all the more. She thought she heard in them the faint rattle of the necklace of cowrie shells and amber [her daughter] Marion always wore" (167). The physical symptoms that accompany this spiritual revival are like the pins and needles of blood flowing to a numb limb; the interaction with Lebert Joseph is uncomfortable and painful, but she feels an urge to discover what he is leading her to, perhaps intuiting salvation. When she recognizes the Juba dance, he is able to identify her nation and convince her to attend the Big Drum. The trip to Carriacou is yet another figuration of the spiritual odyssey similar to circuits to and from Tatem or to and from Ibo Landing, and thus another opportunity for Avey to recover from the trauma of her double-consciousness.

The Carriacou excursion has so far been treated by scholars primarily as a moment of transition in the novel. I offer that the Carriacouan people resemble Avey's conflict between success in capitalistic society and spiritual needs, or more precisely a mode of resolution to that conflict. Beginning with Avey's landing on Grenada, it is clear that this big island and the

smaller one of Carriacou are a microcosm of the ethnic and cultural diversity in the States that Avey has such a hard time dealing with. Disembarking the *Bianca Pride*, Avey becomes lost in sea of people speaking a strange yet somewhat familiar Patois dialect, which she later realizes reminds her of the people of Tatem. A taxi driver comes to her rescue, sweeping her out of the crowded streets. He explains that “They can speak the King’s English good as me and you but the minute they set foot on the wharf for the excursion is only Patois you hearing” (Marshall 76, 187). Avey recalls this explanation later, revealing her fascination with their capacity for code-switching. The “out-islanders” as the cabbie calls them, are also entrepreneurial and competitive: “They has a business mind, you know, same as white people,” but their difference from white capitalists is, “They’s a people sticks together and helps out the one another. Which is why they gets ahead” (78). They are away from their ancestral home on Carriacou for much of the year, but they maintain their communal and traditional identity while advancing themselves economically. Their life on Grenada, which is lined with “a long column of Miami Beach-style hotels” (80), does not conflict with their identities as Carriacouans. The Grenadans, represented by the taxi driver, regards them as “other,” but in awe and respect.

The out-islanders’ ability to balance cultural values with capitalistic ones through strong ties with the community is what was missing from the Johnsons’ life together. Avey’s unconscious longing for community is apparent in her nostalgia for their Harlem apartment and her disapproval of Jerome’s criticism of black folks. But Avey has misguidedly adopted white, bourgeois values, as symbolized by her vacationing aboard the *Bianca Pride*. Avey’s daughter Marion criticizes her mother’s affectation, “Why go on some meaningless cruise with a bunch of white folks anyway, I keep asking you?” (13), and chastises her for not taking a tour of Ghana,

which McNeil notes is her way of encouraging Avey to appreciate her African heritage (188).<sup>11</sup> It is not the rituals she participates in on the excursion that help Avey understand different potentials for black life in America; observing the cultural phenomenon of the excursion, the seamless vacillation that occurs between cultures and identities, introduces her to new possibilities.

Another point of significance of the Carriacou excursion overlooked in the criticism is that the imagery surrounding the journey toward Afrocentric ritual is thickly layered with Catholic imagery. In regards to the boat ride across the channel to Carriacou, Susan Willis writes, “the passage... may be small in geographical terms, but it is vast when measured in personal suffering and psychic transformation” (62). Avey undergoes physical and psychic purgation after violent attacks of vomiting and diarrhea. We are not to take these as mere symptoms of seasickness, but of a heavier soul-sickness, the first signs of which manifest aboard the cruise ship during what has often been discussed as the “parfait scene,” in which Avey’s companions partake of the rich dessert but Avey is overcome with intense feelings of surfeit and bloating that stay with her long after she disembarks. On the boat headed for Carriacou, she is literally and metaphorically purged of the decadence she had allowed herself to get swept up in, but “emerg[ing] from the humiliating, body-weakening experience...with fresh critical insight on her life” (Willis 63). Though the boat from Grenada to Carriacou is a transitional setting, Marshall shows that the change is not a switch from one spiritual realm to another, but from the

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<sup>11</sup> The intention of McNeil’s essay is to view the novel from a wholly Afrocentric perspective. She argues that while critics have viewed Marion’s character as bullyish, Marion actually provides a necessary challenge to “Avey’s blind adherence to a protective assimilationist shell” (188). It is significant, however, that Avey does find appreciation for her African heritage in the Caribbean, underscoring my point that Marshall does not seek a fixed origin of culture and is in many ways not Afrocentric but diasporic in vision.

secular, capitalist limbo to which Avey had been long exiled to a syncretized religious immersion. The passage is significant for its impact on Avey's character, but it is not because she has crossed some threshold dividing New World from Old. Marshall's narrative is more complicated than that. As the physical sensations of nausea swirl in Avey's stomach, various memories swirl in her mind, and cross-cultural religious imagery abounds.<sup>12</sup>

In this passage more than any other, the notion that Marshall promotes traditional African religion over other religions within the African diaspora is strongly challenged, perhaps because of the relentless juxtaposition of religious images. The schooner Avey boards has on its bow a figurehead of a Catholic saint, "the crucifix in its hand had by some miracle remained intact" (193). This detail is not surprising, given the Catholic religious majority on the island. But as Ifa Karade outlines in his history of Yoruba religion, Catholic saints provided the perfect mask for Yoruba orishas, allowing African slaves and their descendants in the New World to maintain their beliefs.<sup>13</sup> What looks like a saint may well be a syncretization of an orisha. Furthermore, we discover the vessel is the *Emanuel C.*, which may refer to one of a number of beatified or canonized saints named Emmanuel. Although St. Emmanuel does not correspond with an orisha, it is interesting that most or all of the Emmanuels were martyred in countries other than their homeland. It is no great leap to postulate that Marshall is recognizing Catholicism as a colonizing agent.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as Smith writes, "Any Christian of the African diaspora has to deal with the fact that slavery and conversion to Christianity were most likely linked in his or her

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<sup>12</sup> Dorothy Hamer Denniston suggests that Marshall's greatest achievement with the novel is her ability to make Avey's character resonate across cultures, so that "we respond differently to each of the diverse cultural icons and codes within the text" (127).

<sup>13</sup> This topic is explored in greater depth in David V. Trotman's study.

<sup>14</sup> Smith connects Emanuel, meaning "God with us" to Avey's name "Avatara," which stems from avatar, "the embodiment of a god," as a basis for reading Avey as a Christ figure in this scene (724).

ancestors' experience" (723). As the schooner itself embodies layered religions, on board Avey remembers fragments of her spiritual past. First is the connection she makes between the elder women sitting on the boat's bench and "the presiding mothers of Mount Olivet Baptist...whose great age and long service to the church had earned them a title even more distinguished than 'sister' and a place of honor in the pews up front" (194). The women simultaneously take on the mantles of African ancestor, "Old people who have the essentials to go on forever," and Christian devotees.<sup>15</sup> Smith interprets the women as "a supportive community, those who help to birth new souls, as the old Carriacou women will help Avey to be reborn" (723). They may be seen as mediators, then, helping Avey negotiate her transition and rebirth, but also mediators in the way they hybridize culture.

The last time Marshall made such direct religious allusions was when Avey remembered her daily private rituals with Jay in Harlem, the last spiritually intact time in her life. It is not surprise, then, that Avey recalls her Harlem neighborhood now upon her spiritual reawakening: when the sails are up, Avey sees them as "those huge ecclesiastical banners the Catholics parade through the streets on the feast days of their saints. And for no reason, not understanding why, she caught herself thinking: it had been done in the name of the Father and of the Son" (195).

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<sup>15</sup> Also notable is Marshall's inclusion of multiple Christian denominations and cultures. The church of Avey's mother is very different from Aunt Cuney's in *Tatem*, though both are Baptist. The Catholicism of the islanders provides further contrast. Trotman and Karade explain the compatibility of Catholicism and Yoruba religion, for example in their monotheism, angels/orishas, in several rituals. Karada elaborates that as Catholicism was the dominant religion of Portuguese and Spanish slave owners in the South Atlantic, African culture remained intact and, in fact, flourished there, albeit in disguise. North America, on the other hand, with its predominantly English Protestant culture, was trickier. He cites lack of numerous saints, a non-tropical climate un conducive to cultural relativism, and inbreeding of American Africans as explanations for the increased "domestication" of Africanism in the North (6). This would explain the geographic spiritualities in *Praisesong*, wherein the further south the characters are, the more closely they identify with traditional African religion, even while practicing some form of Christianity.

The final words, a reference to two distinctively male parts of the holy trinity, do seem to acknowledge the patriarchal dominance inherent in Christianity and invite criticism of the religion. But because Avey immediately abandons this thread of thought without resolving its meaning, readers too are left in a state of ambivalence. An alternative reading suggests Avey's calling on the trinity illustrates how deeply ingrained Christianity is within her, as fixed and intertwined in her subconscious as any other spiritual memory. Again, Marshall suggests the complexity of African diasporic spirituality.

Also aboard the small boat, Avey's memory gives way to an Easter sermon she heard as a child in New York that both affirms Christian belief and illustrates her trauma through metaphor. The preacher is telling the story of the resurrection, using the stone that sealed Christ's tomb as a motif:

Well, I hate to be the one to break the bad news to you beloved, but some of you are sitting up here this morning dressed back in your fancy new hats and your brand new Easter outfits with your souls walled up in a darkness deeper than midnight. Giant stones have done buried your spirit, your heart, your minds, shutting you off from the precious light of salvation. (200)

The stone, he explains, may be any number of sins, including "hypocrisy," "Indifference to the suffering of others," and "the shameful stone of false values, of gimme gimme gimme and more more more." In the stone of false values resounds the salvific wish of the Johnsons and their abandonment of the spirit. The rocking feeling Avey remembers experiencing during the church sermon returns in the form of seasickness, and she evacuates her stomach, the seal of her entombed spirit removed. Smith suggests that Avey is a Christ figure in this scene, as she

undergoes great physical suffering before her resurrection to new life (724). The comparison is favorable, and further evidence of the the value Marshall places on Christianity.

Marshall describes the expurgation as uncontrollable “seizures” and “paroxysms,” bringing to mind at once spirit possession and exorcism.<sup>16</sup> Even the act of vomiting itself looks like prayer ritual. Marshall shows Avey bowing or prostrating repeatedly:

as her stomach heaved up she would drop forward... the force of the vomiting sent her straining out over the railing...the nausea would seize her again, bringing her body stiffly upright and her head wrenching back. There would be the strange moment with her face lifted to the sky beyond the canvas awning. And then she would be hawking, crying, collapsing as her stomach convulsed... (205)

The violence of the scene indicates the intense degree of trauma that Avey suppressed for so many years. Her inner turmoil, which she so effectively kept hidden even from herself, manifests physically, literally bringing her to her knees in strange adoration and marking a metamorphosis of spirit.

The scene ends with images of the Middle Passage. Having achieved a new level of self awareness, and alone in the deckhouse, Avey visualizes:

other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless dark. A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she was. Their moans, rising and falling with each rise and plunge of the schooner, enlarged upon the one filling

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<sup>16</sup> Helen Pyne Timothy describes spirit possession in the ceremony of Legba performed in Haitian voodoo. Unlike demonic possession of the Catholic faith, the possessed “becomes the instrument of the godhead, and his prophet to human beings” (137). This may be compared with the Christian practice of receiving the Holy Spirit.

her head. Their suffering-- the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space-- made hers of no consequence. (209)

Her awakening has finally put her in touch with the vast lineage she felt detached from.

“Through her body,” states Smith, “Avey gains a sense of her place in relation to the history of the African diaspora” (724). This passage recalls Toni Morrison’s description of the Middle Passage in *Beloved*, when Sethe has let down her defenses and laid herself bare to the past-- not only her personal past experiences, but those of her ancestors. Similarly, now that Avey has removed “the stone of false values,” she is receptive to a much longer version of her past, which gives her enough perspective to better endure her own struggles. The allusion to the Middle Passage also serves as a reminder of the religious routes of diasporic religion.

The seeds of what DuBois termed double-consciousness may well have been planted in West Africa by the Christian missionary zeal enacted during the slave trade. According to Maureen Warner-Lewis in her book *Guinea’s Other Suns*, while some Africans denounced their former religions, “a large number maintained traditional beliefs and practices alongside Christianity, using one spiritual resource to supplement and complement the other” (quoted in Karade 145).<sup>17</sup> Ifa Karade further explains that, “The African maintained the ‘Africanness’ of religious being through spirituals; getting the holy ghost (a form of possession); shouting; speaking in tongues; intense preaching, etc. In general, the African soul was not extinguished, but simply transfigured to meet the Euro-social pressures under New World bondage” (5).

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<sup>17</sup> Toyin Falola points out that many cultural changes began in Africa and that “the experience of the ‘Middle Passage’ has to be put where it belongs, in the ‘middle’, so that what happened before and after enslavement appears far more connected than we have assumed” (xiv-v). Carissa Turner Smith also sees cultural exchange in the form of “routes” rather than roots, refusing to draw stark contrasts between Africa and the Americas. This is important to the argument I will make that the Caribbean is an appropriate setting in its symbolic mediation of Western and African religions.

Catholic doctrine proved particularly fertile ground for syncretization; its monotheism and multitude of patron saints provided a “mask” for Oludamare, the One Source of Yoruba, and the orishas, deities each with a distinct character, and as Catholicism was the dominant religion of Portuguese and Spanish slave owners in the South Atlantic, African culture remained intact and, in fact, flourished, albeit in disguise.<sup>18</sup> North America, on the other hand, with its predominantly English Protestant culture, was trickier. Karade cites lack of numerous saints, a non-tropical climate unconducive to cultural relativism, and inbreeding of American Africans as explanations for the increased “domestication” of Africanism in the North (6). Her theory has implications for *Praisesong for the Widow* in the spiritual geography of the novel. It is interesting to note that, indeed, the further north Avey is, the further she is spiritually removed. More importantly, Karade’s analysis of religious synchresis provides a historical basis for Marshall’s melding of religious allusions, particularly in the Grenada-Carriacou scene.

Continuing the motif of syncretized religion once on Carriacou, Marshall places Avey in the care of Lebert Joseph’s daughter Rosalie (whose name evokes the Catholic *rosary*) who performs a ritual washing that incorporates several spiritual practices. Rosalie’s personal items that Avey immediately focuses on, her gold jewelry, wedding ring, and Madras headtie, presage the blending of cultures she will soon enact. Wedding bands are most closely associated with Christian marriage, but likely originated in ancient Egypt, predating Christianity by about one thousand years. The “touches of gold at her ears and wrists” may be ornamental or designate her ancestry in the “Gold Coast” of West Africa, where the jewelry was worn for ritual, not

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<sup>18</sup> I refer to Yoruba religion because of the Yoruba were enslaved in vaster numbers than any other peoples, accounting for over half of exported slaves from West Africa (*Transformations* 78-9). The “Big Drum” festivals on Carriacou celebrate West African ancestors, who would have been predominantly Yorubic.

decoration. The headtie recalls the Creole madras costume worn by African slaves on Catholic feast days.<sup>19</sup> Rosalie's appearance prefigures the life-bringing miracle she performs through syncretized ritual.

In a mess and ashamed after disembarking the *Emanuel C.*, Avey wakes up in a bed in Rosalie's home where she continues her transformation process literally in the hands of Rosalie Parve. Together with a maid, Rosalie bathes Avey as if it were "an office they performed every day" (Marshall 220). Highly ritualistic in execution, this priestess with "special powers of seeing and knowing," bathes, oils, chants, and messages Avey back to spiritual well-being. The sponge bath from a galvanized metal washtub reminds Avey of Cuney's washtub in Tatem, bringing her mentally to a purer time. On one level, the water represents the fluidity of time and memory for Avey. It is also a Christian baptism, a washing away of sin, initiated by Rosalie: "'Is not trouble, oui'-- saying it in a way that suggested she knew (knew as intimately as if she had lived them!) all the things that had happened over those years that would make her object to something as simple as being given a bath" (219). Rosalie thus absolves Avey of her past transgressions. She then anoints her with lime oil and performs what Avey directly refers to as "A laying on of hands." These are sacraments whereby she is blessed and receives the holy spirit, renewed. Yet the ceremony is at the same time West African funerary practice. The washing and touching of the (spiritually) dead Avey prepares her for the afterlife, and is therefore also a ritual of spiritual cleansing and renewal. At the end of the scene, Avey becomes "aware of a faint stinging as happens in a limb that's fallen asleep once it's roused, and a warmth could be felt as if the blood there had been at a standstill, but was now tentatively getting under way again" (223). This

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<sup>19</sup> See H el ene Zamor for the history and sociology of the madras costume.

recalls the initial psychic reanimation Avey begins to undergo in her first meeting with Lebert Joseph.

After recovering herself, and finding that visitors had left gifts by her bedside (echoing Avey's memory of offerings made to the dead at a funeral she had attended as a child in Tatem), she is open again to the culture she had left behind long ago. The ceremonies that Lebert Joseph performs to please the "Old Parents, the Long-time People," including libation, candle lighting, and an offering of corn, disquieted Avey the day before. Post-cleansing, "she found nothing odd or disconcerting about them" (225), having become refamiliarized with the value of ritual.

The culmination of Avey's pilgrimage is the Big Drum. The celebration, which includes the performances of various "nation dances" of West Africa, uses ritual language to encode peoples' histories and serves to remember lineage and respect the ancestors. The variety in dances allows the descendants of slaves on Carriacou to differentiate themselves by nation and celebrate diasporic African culture. The opening song, called the Beg Pardon, is a prayer "not only for themselves and for the friends and neighbors present in the yard, but for all their far-flung kin as well-- the sons and daughters, grands and great-grands in Trinidad, Toronto, New York, London..." (Marshall 236). Avey is able to locate herself, finally, within her family (evidenced in her vision of Cuney standing beside her) and as a member of the larger African diaspora. This does not remove her from her American society; Marshall's description of a nation dance is highly reminiscent of Cuney's description of the Ring Shout, bringing Avey's story full circle and emphasizing the overlap of spiritual traditions. The final chord struck in the ceremony strikes also an inner chord in Avey resounding in trauma and recovery:

The theme of separation and loss the note embodied, the unacknowledged longing it conveyed summed up feelings that were beyond words, feelings and a host of subliminal memories that over the years had proven more durable and trustworthy than the history with its trauma and pain out of which they had come. After centuries of forgetfulness and even denial, they refused to go away. The note was a lamentation that could hardly have come from the rum keg of a drum. Its source had to be the heart, the bruised still-bleeding innermost chamber of the collective heart. (244-5)

In this, Marshall's final reminder to Avey of the wholeness that can only come with recognition of the full self, including its "subliminal memories," within the broad context of heritage and history, is also a reminder to any diasporic subject under the weight of double-consciousness.

Avey's journey does not end in Carriacou, at some imagined point of spiritual origin. If finding origins was Marshall's intended theme, perhaps she would not have stopped in the Caribbean Sea but extended her setting to Africa, though even then the fact of Avey's Americanism would remain. Rather than the possibility of discovering a finite origin, Marshall insists that tapping into a lineage, like a great continuum extending infinitely through time, is curative enough. Avey, after all, will return to New York and Tatem and will convey her new wisdom to her children and grandchildren, becoming herself an ancestor figure. With a hybridized spirituality that spans the Atlantic, she can now live no longer torn between cultures. It is in reworking notions of disparate spiritualities, not acceding to the dilemma of cultural dualism, that one may recover from cultural trauma.

### **Healing Readings and Sacred Politics in Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

The violence with which Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* takes on the struggle of confronting the past is indicative of what is at stake in the story: not only the fate of her characters, but the fate of a nation. As Henry Louis Gates has observed, "The history that *Beloved* represents is both private and public, personal and collective" (987). The history is also extremely traumatic. Ron Eyerman's work on cultural trauma distinguishes that "There is a difference between trauma as it affects individuals and as a cultural process" (1). *Beloved* depicts the interplay between individual and cultural trauma. Sethe's and Paul D.'s battle with their traumatic pasts, both what has happened to them and what they have perpetrated, is also an allegory for how America copes with its traumatic history of slavery. Through the characters' slow reconciliation with their pasts, Morrison suggests how America, too, might move forward.

Sethe, an escaped slave who kills her daughter to prevent her from having to endure the brutality of slavery, refuses not only to confront the murder but also the experiences that led to such a decision. Although she tries to live in denial of her past, or rather in denial of its many lasting impacts, the past nevertheless resurfaces involuntarily, finally haunting her into confrontation. In comparison, Sethe's fellow slave Paul D. escapes the same plantation and finds the scars on his psyche, as penetrating as Sethe's physical scars, are not so easily hidden away. American readers willing as Sethe and Paul to leave slavery in the past prefer a state of what Morrison calls "national amnesia" (Angelo 257) to the trauma of remembering<sup>20</sup>. The shame and

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<sup>20</sup> In line with Morrison's assertion of "national amnesia," in "Fixing Methodologies: *Beloved*," Barbara Christian discusses slavery as a "four-hundred-year holocaust... Yet for reasons having as much to do with the inability on the part of America to acknowledge that it is capable of having generated such a holocaust, as well as with the horror that such a memory calls up for African Americans themselves, the Middle Passage has practically disappeared from American cultural memory" (7). These ideas help support the parallel dynamics of memory in the novel between the personal trauma of characters remembering and the wider, American social trauma of remembering.

horror of the slavery era have proven too much for most to bear, leading to *Beloved's* dedication, a memorial to the "Sixty million and more" all-but-forgotten victims of the slave trade. This dedication and the novel as a whole suggest that without facing the history that still potently affects and shapes American society in countless ways, not least of all the country's race relations and social equality, we miss the opportunity to reconcile ourselves to it in order to recover and grow.

Reading *Beloved* as a vehicle for trauma recovery, specifically African American recovery, is not a new concept. Contending that the Middle Passage is at the core of the novel, Barbara Christian states that the text is meant "to expose and dramatize that psychic rupture [of the Middle Passage]" and that African American readers can find reading it a "healing experience" ("Fixing" 8). Eyerman examines the impact of slavery generations after its abolition, "not as institution or even experience, but as collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people," specifically of African Americans (1). Eyerman defines cultural trauma as follows:

As opposed to psychological or physical trauma, which involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion. In this sense, the trauma need not necessarily be felt by everyone in a community or experienced directly by any or all. While it may be necessary to establish some event as the significant "cause," its traumatic meaning must be established and accepted, a process which requires time, as well as mediation and representation. (2)

The implication of this theory for *Beloved* is that Morrison's text both mediates and represents the trauma of slavery for African Americans. Eyerman, draws comparison between cultural trauma and what Arthur Neal calls "national trauma," events with long-lasting effects that become "ingrained in collective memory" (qtd. in Eyerman 2). Such a comparison also can be made between *Beloved*'s negotiation of African American cultural trauma and of American national trauma at large. Slavery, while especially traumatic for African Americans, is also a national trauma. And in both cases, the trauma is located in memory; potential to overcome these traumas depends on unflinching confrontation with the past. It is no wonder, then, that so much scholarship on *Beloved* is dedicated to memory and (re)remembering the past.

In *Beloved*, Morrison demonstrates the ways in which the past both revisits and is revisited. By destabilizing conventional notions of time, place, and culture as fixed and objective through a narrative structure that transcends such notions, Morrison debunks the myth that any unexamined past can wholly stay in the past. One site of revisitation of the past and cultural negotiation in the novel is religion. Though much has been written on the sacred in relation to *Beloved*, I look at the sacred as a component of cultural memory and consider how, through close examination of Morrison's varied religious imagery, *Beloved* suggests individuals and collectives might heal spiritually as they acknowledge the trauma of slavery. More specifically, I show to what extent certain ways of reading the sacred in the novel align with *Beloved*'s healing agenda.

### **Representatives of Trauma**

The personal traumas of Morrison's characters extend in meaning far beyond the individual. That there is a difference between physical or psychological trauma of the individual

and the collective trauma of a culture or nation bears repeating (Eyerman 2). In *Beloved's* many broken characters we find symptoms of the broader, cultural traumas inflicted by slavery. This is true not just for Sethe and Paul D., but even the most minor characters, black or white, former slave or not, is marked by this trauma. Here, I focus primarily on Sethe and Paul D. Morrison pairs them to highlight the deep, gendered psychological damage they sustain and the resulting differences in their methods of coping. Although they come from the same plantation, Sethe and Paul D.'s suffering are situated along gender lines and so differ. Sethe suffers particularly female traumas-- of being milked, having to prostitute herself, and in her maternal dilemma of whether to allow her children to suffer or to take their lives. Paul D., on the other hand, experiences trauma through his notions of manhood. The brutality and subservience he endures cause him to question his masculinity and indeed his very humanity. Although he, too, is sexually abused, he perceives his rape less as a physical violation of his body than an affront to his legitimacy as a man.

The mental anguish of killing her daughter, even as she rationalizes the killing, is the most prominent source of pain in Sethe's narrative, but her claim to herself and others that the infanticide is justifiable is questionable through the sheer fact that she is still haunted by it. In her philosophy, some living conditions are worse than death. Certainly the atrocities she endured just prior to her escape from Sweet Home, (including being restrained and milked, then whipped mercilessly), and the experiences described by Paul D., (such as being forced to wear a horse's bit, chained up, and regularly sexually abused), seem to support this claim. But Denver, who survived her mother's attack, causes ambiguity for how the reader perceives the murder. Denver's existence both affirms Sethe's choice to kill, for the choice did save Denver from

slavery, but also challenges that choice by attesting to better possibilities for future generations. Denver, after all, is finally able to move beyond her own pain, integrate with society, and receive an education. Not thinking beyond her own experience, the personal and individual, Sethe sees the killing as righteous, the ultimate expression of love and protection that Paul D. describes as “too thick” when he observes, “This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman; talked about baby clothes like any other woman, but what she meant could cleave to the bone. This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw” (193). Sethe’s ultimate sacrifice out of love for her children is at once brutal and intensely devotional. But from a communal perspective, one that takes whole families and generations into account, survival must trump everything, even the possibility, or indeed likelihood, of suffering. Sethe’s inability to see beyond her own prior experience prevents her from considering the lives or futures of others. In her mind, her children were doomed to endure her past, and she saved them by keeping them from Schoolteacher: “It’s my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that” (194). Yet her vision is shortsighted, and as Paul D. tells her, “There could have been a way. Some other way.” Although Paul D. has also endured much suffering, this statement suggests he is capable of imagining alternative outcomes for Sethe’s children. He and Sethe did, after all, escape Sweet Home and, though they live with the trauma of memory, they are free to pursue better lives. For Sethe, the trauma of memory obliterates other possibilities; she is unable to recognize the distinction between past and present, much less envision a better future.

At the heart of Sethe’s trauma is the betrayal *of* her past perpetrated during the slave trade. Perhaps one of the most tragic aspects of her story is the fact that Sethe mostly does not understand the nature or extent of the betrayal, and so socially and emotionally bears all

responsibility for her actions, which actually resound with much broader culpability. Beginning with her relationship with her own mother, Sethe knows only small fragments about her “ma’am” who came from Africa via the Middle Passage and did not speak English. She remembers how her mother slapped her in the face when, in a desperate attempt at connection, Sethe naively asked to be branded with the same mark her mother showed her in order that Sethe could identify her mother’s body upon death. For years Sethe took the slap as a rejection: “I didn’t understand it then. Not till I had a mark of my own” (73). It occurred to her only later in life that her mother hoped to shield her from what the brand signified, namely great physical suffering and oppression. The brand—a circle and a cross—may be the symbol denoting gender, but also signifies an imperialist claim, in the form of Christianity, on the African body. The mother’s censure of Sethe’s desire for the brand does nothing to help her daughter avoid its signification; like her mother, Sethe is a victim of slavery.

Subliminally, at least, Sethe seems to sense the brutal impact of a system much larger than the individual. Nan, the slave designated to nurse and raise her, described Sethe’s mother’s experience aboard the slave ship where she was continually raped and where she threw her unwanted babies, products of the rapes, overboard. Sethe describes being “angry [about the story], but not certain at what” (74). She mourns her mother, but also her own similar fate. The institution of slavery that robbed her of a mother also robbed Sethe of any ties to her heritage, familial and cultural. Sethe had once been able to understand the African language of her mother and Nan, but it became lost on her over time and separation. The tragic irony is that even as Sethe initially misunderstands the nature of her circumstances at Sweet Home, believing in the benevolence of her masters, the Garners, Morrison allows readers to see the extent of her loss,

prior to and beyond the killing of her daughter, and know unequivocally that its origin is slavery itself.

Extending from the trauma of slavery is Sethe's underlying guilt and slowly emerging perception of the horror of her actions. If we allow that Sethe had her children's best interests in mind when she concluded that death was a suitable alternative to slavery for them, then we must also recognize the murder (and attempted murders on her other children) as an assertion of self-agency. This is perhaps most evident in the vigorous diction with which she describes the infanticide: "Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them" (192). The forceful verb choice helps to characterize Sethe as powerful and fierce. Unconsciously following the example of her mother who discarded unwanted, nameless babies gotten by rape, Sethe also asserted a certain power over her oppressors by killing her child, claiming it as her own and not theirs. Sethe does not realize at first the powerlessness behind her presumably powerful act, a larger force that precipitated the murder. It is only over time, in learning the fate of her husband Halle, who went insane after witnessing Sethe being milked by Schoolteacher's nephews; in hearing Paul D.'s experiences on the chain gang; in discovering the burning death of Sixo, that Sethe begins to understand the magnitude of grief and suffering inflicted by slavery. Though being able to place herself in the broader context of slavery may on the surface promise some relief from guilt, whatever agency Sethe thought she had is now replaced with the thought that she has acted as an instrument of savage oppression. Rather than having saved the child from slavery, slavery succeeded in

claiming her child's life *through* her, a conduit of its destructive force. Thus Sethe suffers a traumatic duality, a division in her self-perception.

Paul D.'s trauma similarly stems from an inclination to identify his actions and thus himself through the eyes of his dehumanizing oppressors. If Sethe acted like an animal, according to Paul D., when she killed Beloved, Paul D. has trouble seeing himself as fully human. Stamp Paid describes the dilemma of black people having fallen into the role created for them by white men as a growing jungle:

Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more coloredpeople spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. (234)

This passage closely echoes Du Bois's sentiments about double-consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), specifically the psychic rupture that comes from viewing oneself from the perspective of "the other world" (Du Bois 5), and points to an agonizing duality present in several of the novel's characters, but most particularly Paul D. Like Sethe, Paul D. was led to commit acts that only could have occurred under the dehumanizing conditions of slavery and yet sees himself as a shameful perpetrator rather than a victim. Paul D.'s implication when he tells Sethe, "You got to feet, Sethe, not four" (194) as he confronts her about the killing, is followed

by a silent confession: "How fast he had moved from his shame to hers." Denouncing Sethe merely attempts to shift his guilt away from himself.

Paul D.'s traumatic duality extends from a divide he experienced first at Sweet Home, which he, too, believed to be benevolent. Paul D. took his sense of manhood from his owner, Mr. Garner. Out of ego and spite, Garner called his slaves men instead of boys. He did so to raise his own status, setting the bar of those he dominated high as an indication of the height of his own supremacy. As if Garner were the God out of *Genesis* with the power of the word "to make and call his own niggers men" (13), Paul D. takes his identity from his master instead of from within. Thus Paul D. illustrates perfectly Du Bois's description of "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (5). Paul D. sees in his sex with cows, for example, a sign of his manhood at first:

They were young and so sick with the absence of women they had taken to calves... A year of yearning, when rape seemed the solitary gift of life. The restraint they had exercised possible only because they were Sweet Home men—the ones Mr. Garner bragged about. (12)

At the time, resort to bestiality was to him a noble endeavor that allowed him to avoid rape. But later, he understands it as a violation rather than a chivalrous act of restraint, and an indication that he might actually be no better than an animal. The bestiality, his feelings of inferiority to a barnyard rooster named Mister, the oral sex forced on him by prison guards, and his compulsion to sleep with Sethe's daughter Beloved: he gathers all of these as evidence of having been "isolated in a wonderful lie" (260) that he was indeed a man. Recalling how quickly Schoolteacher mastered him, Paul D. says, "Garner called and announced them men—but only

on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not?

...It troubled him that, concerning his own manhood, he could not satisfy himself on that point.”

Similar to Sethe, Paul D. recognizes the fallacy of his self-agency, even the agency to identify himself as a man. He thus illustrates the trauma of slavery on African American male identity.

Despite differing experiences that are also highly gendered, what Paul D. and Sethe share in regards to trauma is a breach between their selves as autonomous human beings and their selves as subjects of slavery. The complacency they were lulled into at Sweet Home was a tool of victimization by the oppressive social structure that denied their power of spirit and will. This is evident in Morrison's portrayal of Sethe, stuck in the grips of the past and allowing herself to be consumed by the ghost of slavery, *Beloved*. Sethe is presented as a willing martyr figure, sacrificing herself in earnest on the altar of her past. Yet Morrison does not allow her to be a martyr, and has Sethe released from the hold of her past by her community, which itself had to recognize the meaning of *Beloved*-- trauma prevailing over the spirit-- before asserting themselves and coming to her rescue. They symbolically exorcise the ghost of the debilitating past in favor of strong, forward-looking community: "...the rapt faces of thirty neighborhood women. Some had their eyes closed; others looked at the hot, cloudless sky... For Sethe it was as the though the Clearing had come to her...It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (308). Roxanne Reed writes, "the necessity of collective action to save the individual also makes Sethe's baptism a test of communal wholeness" (71). In other words, it is only when the women choose to confront the ghost of the past that Sethe can rouses from her complacency and moves forward, leaving *Beloved* behind.

Yet the novel bears out, too, that to ignore one's place in history is to be stuck under its influence and bear personally the weight of all its consequences, as evidenced in the harrowing feelings of guilt of characters like Paul D. and Sethe. Morrison explores both of these approaches to coping with trauma, defeat and denial, and concludes that neither is acceptable.

### **Religion & Recovery**

Becoming enslaved by traumatic experience or denying it altogether are common yet debilitating reactions to trauma. *Beloved* suggests that although it is necessary to identify and confront sources of suffering, it is equally important to ultimately leave them in the past. Skewing too much in one direction, as demonstrated by Sethe, has catastrophic consequences. Holding the past and present in tension is key to healing. Morrison does a balancing act with religion and culture in the novel, as well, which tie to the healing process. In an interview with Thomas LeClair, Toni Morrison commented that language was the most distinctive feature of her fiction, and it has to be because, she states, black people hold language so dear:

The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language... It's terrible to think that a child with five different present tenses comes to school to be faced with those books that are less than his own language. And then to be told things about his language, which is him, that are sometimes permanently damaging... This is a really cruel fallout of racism. I know the standard English. I want to use it to help restore the other language, the lingua franca. (123-4)

Morrison implies here that there is something more at stake in her use of black vernacular and slang; she is talking about the need to conserve black culture in all aspects. Certainly spiritual tradition is a part of that. Paralleling its linguistic variety, the novel contains both the standard--

the mainstream metaphysical ideologies-- and offers also the complexities that come with African diasporic culture. Furthermore, the *lingua franca* or bridge between cultures is the main project of *Beloved*, which endeavors to reconcile the African with the American, to enrich the American experience by connecting it with its African roots. Its purpose is not to champion one heritage at the exclusion of the other, but to explore sites where blending and conciliation might occur, resulting in a wholeness not otherwise perceived. One such site is the sacred, religious or otherwise spiritual elements in the text.

Morrison's use of the sacred is more diverse than scholarship on her work generally attests. During a lecture at Harvard Divinity School in 2012, Professor David Currasco described a conversation he had with longtime friend Toni Morrison about the spiritual elements of her work. Together they resolved there are three distinct ways in which she portrays the sacred: "through Christian rituals, sermons, and symbols; through African-influenced themes and characters; and through what Morrison called 'just strange stuff'" (qtd. in Walsh). *Beloved* is rife with religious images and allusions to the sacred that can be read as either distinctly Christian or distinctly African, yet the most compelling examples of the sacred in novel cross cultural boundaries. But the criticism of *Beloved* tends to favor one tradition over the other, which results in implicit insinuations over political dominance. Some critics who ignore the African element, for example, in doing so assert white supremacy to some extent, as they reinforce hegemonic Western forms of thought.<sup>21</sup> Purely Afro-centric readings, in asserting black power, overlook the essential Christian component that is a reality of most African

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<sup>21</sup> Gina Nicole Greenway typifies this approach, writing that "Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is an artfully crafted tale that adopts the gothic creed of past sins taking root in spectral and psychological haunting and beautifully (and tragically) weaves it into the Christian doctrine of atonement and forgiveness" (3). Her reading avoids the novel's African cultural content.

Americans' lives. There are means and opportunities, however, to look at the full picture of Morrison's portrayal of the sacred that approach the novel in a less divisive, more complex and inclusive way that aligns with its focus on restoration and recovery.

One plausibly restorative mode of reading the sacred in *Beloved* is to universalize its story of slavery by placing it in mythic context. Nancy Berkowitz Bate performs such a reading. She correlates Sethe's house number 124 with Psalm 124 and draws parallels between *Beloved* and Exodus and Passover Haggadah stories. Keeping both Jewish and Christian scripture as referents allows readers to understand that "Morrison's book is itself a kind of Eucharist for her readers; by reading it, we consume, assimilate, and remember the anguish of slavery, the elation of freedom, and the sacrifice of Beloved" (Bate 28). Bate shows the mythical pattern of both the novel and scripture, putting them on the same level instead of treating Morrison's text, as some critics do,<sup>22</sup> as merely a retelling of the ancient. In doing so, Bate manages to keep the novel in the present while also making the biblical mythology seem more relevant and contemporary. This reading demonstrates the sacred as a mode of rehabilitation from the trauma of slavery by placing slavery in a much broader, global context that emphasizes community and shared experience, which the novel advocates for as essential in the healing process, personal and collective. But readings that are solely predicated on Judeo-Christian tradition nevertheless maintain and perpetuate the dominant Western perspective and so attend to cultural trauma in a mostly superficial way.

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<sup>22</sup> See Greenway, above. The problem with these types of interpretations, which situate the story of *Beloved* firmly in the past, miss the crucial point in the novel that resigning wholly to the past is dangerous and disempowering, for it allows the past alone to signify the present. Thus Greenway and those who interpret *Beloved* in similar fashion perform a function much like the character Beloved does with Sethe, which is to pull her backwards, rooting her helplessly in the past.

There is no doubt that Afro-centrist readings of *Beloved* have healing power of their own in the pride, assertion of black values, and rejection (whether explicit or through omission) of the perspective of the oppressor. For example, Ru-yu Zheng argues that in *Beloved* “the narrative healing process is really initiated through a remembering and retelling of the African myth of the ancestors and of the River Goddess Oshun, who is embodied by Beloved” (152). Teresa Washington makes a similar move by interpreting the mother-daughter relationship in the novel with the Yoruba concept of Àjé, a feminine spiritual force, and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi explains the phenomenon of Beloved’s return to Sethe by employing the Yoruba idea of abiku and Igbo notion of ogbanje, which both deal with reincarnated souls. By returning Morrison’s narrative to a squarely African space, readers regain some of what was lost in the historical trauma of diaspora and slavery. Morrison herself implied in 1981 that criticism of her works was dominated by a white worldview and was “like having a linguist who doesn’t understand your language tell you what you’re saying,” a feeling she described as isolating (LeClair 128). For Zheng, Washington, and Ogunyemi, answering Morrison’s call for a more diverse body of criticism means stepping away from the conventions of Western critics and empowering the African voice that has historically (and critically) been silenced.

Africana theoretical approaches to interpreting the sacred in *Beloved* are fundamentally important to its theme of recovering from racial trauma. Ignoring or denying the past is damaging, as demonstrated in Sethe’s unwillingness to confront the complexities of her life as a slave, and in the subsequent ghost of her murdered daughter who haunts her. Revisiting or remembering roots furthermore allows us unique insights. Washington’s analysis of Àjé, for example, portrays Sethe’s murder of her baby as “the most profound expression of devotion”

because Sethe uses her maternal, protective powers to return her child to its safer cosmological origin (177). With this perspective, popular figurations of morality are destabilized, and we are required to reexamine them in the light of multiculturalism. Yet one must ask whether such purely origins-based approaches as Washington's are wholly viable in reconciling trauma.

Almost as problematic as readings that disregard African spiritual elements, those that disregard black people's adopted Western religions also depreciate the multiplicity of the novel and the African American experience as a whole<sup>23</sup>.

In a narrative that transcends time and space yet refuses to go as far as touch African soil, the characters seem to straddle both worlds of Africa and America but have firm grounding in neither. This straddling, even as it causes trauma and illustrates the cultural dilemmas of former slaves and their descendants, also creates a wonderful and unique balance for the story. It is in balance, such as Baby Suggs' decidedly Christian yet quintessentially African sermons in the woods, that scars may be healed:

“Let your wives and your children see you dance,” she told them, and groundlife shuddered under their feet.

Finally she called the women to her. “Cry,” she told them. “For the living and the dead. Just cry.” And without covering their eyes the women let loose.

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced,

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<sup>23</sup> Barbara Christian laments in “Fixing Methodologies: Beloved” that many forms of Afrocentrism “undercut the very concept they intended to propose— that there are different interpretations of history and different narratives... [and] multiple philosophical approaches to understanding life,” comparing such tunnel-visioned approaches to Eurocentric criticism (7). Her own discussion of African cosmology in *Beloved* is meant to widen the scope of meaning to include African philosophies that in 1993 she felt had been overlooked and is careful to validate other perspectives.

women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her big heart. (103)

Reed notes Morrison's "reliance upon preaching as an African American folk religious practice" (58) and the importance of music and other oral expressive forms used in the scene to establish Baby Suggs as a womanist<sup>24</sup> preacher within the Christian tradition. Reed also recognizes, however, the African values of community and ancestry that Baby's sermons uphold and the restorative power of cultural memory. Taylor-Guthrie includes discussion of dance and other non-verbal rituals in this "syncretized Afro-Christian sermon" (122), whose intent is to restore the spirit. Baby's followers are "AME's and Baptists, Holinesses and Sanctifieds," (*Beloved* 102)-- in other words firmly Christian individuals. Yet they are also victims of slavery and racism, as Baby reminds them: "Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it" (103). Her tone may be of the church; her power may be womanist; her calls may be African-- but it is the humanist message delivered through the combination of these that brings peace to her community which still reels from the traumas of slavery while holding dear the religion colonized in them in bondage. Baby Suggs recognizes the complexities of blackness in America, and the freedom, self-love, and solidarity she preaches is meant to fortify her followers as they make their way from a place of suffering to one of recovery and growth.

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<sup>24</sup> Alice Walker, who coined the term, used it to describe black women feminists who defy societal norms and promote equality in race, class, and gender. Reed discusses Suggs as womanist in the character's insistence on the wellbeing of her people.

Reading *Beloved* fastidiously means bridging cultures, for it this bridging, this *Middle Passage*, that is at the very core of Morrison's novel. Its characters must come to terms with the aftermath of trauma; all are faced with whether to retreat into their pain and then past, to try to disconnect from it, or to ultimately reconcile with the trauma and move forward, however difficult and unsure the future may be. As matters of the spirit play a vital part in their perspectives and actions, the spiritual must be confronted in the same, progressive manner. Ogunyemi's work on the abiku/ogbanje relationship in *Beloved* sheds much needed light on African sacred aspects of the novel and also offers a path toward mutual appreciation between cultures in acknowledging biblical elements. Ogunyemi notes that Denver, unlike her mother and sister who fulfil African roles of abiku/ogbanje, is Westernized. He sees in the three women a triangulation in which various cultural perspectives coexist. Recognizing, identifying, and then bridging diasporic religions is a constructive approach to the sacred in *Beloved* that serves, like the novel itself, to reconcile trauma.

In her introduction to *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2009), K. Zauditu-Selassie describes how it is that she had been "baptized and confirmed as a Catholic," yet also became "a fully initiated priest of Obatala in the Lukumi Yoruba spiritual tradition," and is able to "function ritually in both systems" (7). She asserts that her experience of practice within the two systems is not unique. Zauditu-Selassie argues that black Americans are "dancing between two realms" (ix), that African ritual is passed on within black communities, is internalized, and is assimilated into their own American experience. Her experience of cultural synchresis informs her readings of Morrison's texts, particularly the function of memory as spiritual practice in *Beloved*. Memory, according to Zauditu-Selassie, "allows for the affirmation

of the ancestral ontological experience” (149), but also “help[s] elide the past into the present,” which is difficult for those who either do not want to remember or do not want to face current circumstances. Interestingly, then, it is remembering the past that moves people forward by removing gaps and barriers that left characters like Sethe feeling broken. Zauditu-Selassie insightfully reads *Beloved* as the embodiment of memory that “Bridg[es] the gap between North America and Africa, the past and present, the dead and the living, the flesh and the spirit...” (160). I further suggest that *Beloved* is a function of ambiguous cosmology. She may be an abiku child or an ancestor incarnate of the African tradition, or she may be the resurrection of a sacrificed innocent of biblical lore. Most likely she is all of these simultaneously, a personification of forged cultures. In fact, it is because of her syncretic nature that she so effectively arbitrates realms.

Reading multiple religions in the novel as syncretism on Morrison’s part is far more appropriate than dismissing entire traditions altogether. Morrison herself is critical of scholarship that evades non-white aspects of text (*Playing in the Dark* 9). But another way to deal with the sacred in *Beloved* is to question the notion of sacred itself. Going back to Morrison’s comment that part of her use of the sacred is “just strange stuff” (Walsh), we might interpret this ambiguous statement as the sacred defying category, that is itself ambiguous. Shirley Stave, for example, analyzes Morrison’s allusion to the Jewish myth of Lilith, Adam’s first wife who left him in her refusal to be subservient to him and was later demonized. On first glance *Beloved* has parallels with all the tropes of the Lilith legend, but Morrison’s allusion suggests that the myth “sanction[s] female defiance of patriarchal authority,” the Judeo-Christian religious structure included (Stave 65). Thus Morrison’s use of Western religion serves to

undermine its dogma and re-codify feminine power. Stave states that at the same time Morrison marks Sethe as Lilith, she simultaneously “encode[s] her mythically as a Great Mother Goddess figure” (51), an archetype of traditional African religions. This is an example of how Sethe is both a subject of patriarchal oppression and can transcend it and heal. Deborah Guth also views Morrison’s use of the sacred as ironic, observing the ubiquity of both African and Christian beliefs, though they are employed in unexpected ways. Guth identifies several Christian images, for example, that actually serve to attack the “transcendent Christian model” (91) and turn it on its head rather than uplift Christian doctrine. Allusions such as Sethe’s mother’s cross-shaped brand and the tree on Sethe’s back, for example, emphasize human depravity and degradation, not holiness. Guth sees in *Beloved* a complex and “continuous dialogue between various... idea-systems” (84). Destabilizing traditional meanings of religious allusion is in line with Morrison’s destabilization of time and space<sup>25</sup>, techniques that liberate her characters from confining and oppressive structures and create new and renewing spaces for them.

Guth’s and Stave’s reading of religion against the grain point the way toward postsecular readings of *Beloved*, wherein contradictions, differences, and juxtapositions in regards to religious perspectives are accepted as true reflections of the multiplicities within societies<sup>26</sup>.

John McClure in *Partial Faiths* (2007) states that “Morrison’s chastening of biblical expectations bespeaks a spiritual sobriety that is pervasive in postsecular fiction. This pessimistic assessment

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<sup>25</sup> For example, the structure of the novel alternates among several characters’ perspectives, employs frequent and unannounced flashbacks, and occasionally uses a stream of consciousness narrative mode.

<sup>26</sup> Manav Ratti’s *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* (2014) suggests the personally and culturally restorative powers of postsecular thought, especially among diasporic peoples, stating, “there are powerful modes of living together in spite of the divides of religion and nation: indigenous, personal modes that can be marked by fellowship, community, open-mindedness, and acceptance and embracing of others” (xviii). Considering the African diasporic subject of *Beloved*, it is important to acknowledge the postsecular aspects of Morrison’s writing.

of sacred projects of perfection is evident... [and] only partially offset by the insistence that spiritually redemptive forces are nevertheless also at work in the world” (128). Even in her criticism of religion and opposition to the church establishment, Morrison still embraces spirituality<sup>27</sup>. Postsecular readings such as these thoroughly engage our political consciousness in regards to the employment of the sacred and point to the rejection of established, dogmatic values as a way to overcome traumas related to identity and feelings of self-worth. Much of Sethe’s and Paul D.’s guilt, for example, stems from their non-adherence to values created by systems in which they were not full participants. Paul D. feels subject to whites’ definitions of manhood, which, being black, he can never live up to. Sethe, from an ideological Christian perspective, should be demonized like Lilith; but stripped of its patriarchal ideology, the biblical myth she is compared with actually attests to her power, as Stave points out. Being judged by institutional standards designed to exclude inflicts trauma, but to reject or re-vision those standards is to recover.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of *dialogised heteroglossia* is an excellent tool to open dialogue *between* the Christian and African sacred in the novel. Bula Maddison explains in her 2007 essay “Liberation Story or Apocalypse” how this theory can be used to navigate *Beloved*’s African and African-American perspectives.<sup>28</sup> Although Bakhtin does not address the topic of literary allusion, Maddison argues that allusions are indeed a form of what Bakhtin calls double-voiced discourse, in which an author uses language ironically. The expectations set up

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<sup>27</sup> See also Carolyn A. Mitchell, who argues that *Beloved* refigures three gospel stories. Mitchell argues that Morrison’s biblical allusions serve to undermine Christian dogma to show the “distance between religion and spirituality,” meaning the difference between established theology and the spirit of Christianity experienced by African Americans (28-9).

<sup>28</sup> For other applications of Bakhtin theory on *Beloved*, see Danille Taylor-Guthrie’s “Who Are the Beloved? Old and New Testaments, Old and New Communities of Faith” (1995) for analysis of Baby Suggs’ “syncretized Afro-Christian sermon” (122) and Deborah Guth’s discussion of Christian symbolism.

by allusion (Maddison gives the example of Stamp Paid being a biblical Joshua in his delivering slaves across a river, but the allusion to Lilith is another figuration) can be toyed with, and often are in *Beloved*<sup>29</sup>. What is expected from the allusion and what actually manifests are the double voices of the text. Bakhtin calls the interplay of these voices “interanimation.” Maddison suggests this interanimation is a form of hybridity, the interplay of “*belief systems* [that] are revised and shaped and reshaped as they contend” (21.3). Further, she states that “African-American Christianity writes the story of blacks’ freedom from slavery in America onto the biblical story of the escape from slavery in Egypt.” Further, African-American Christianity is also written onto African cosmological beliefs, such as in Washington’s discussion of allusions to Àjé. Looking at the sacred from Bakhtin’s view, we discover that conflicting perspectives need not be considered so negatively; rather, out of the conflict might come a third space, a space for healing and reconciliation.

### Conclusion

Many Africanist critics have noted that Morrison, an icon of the Black Arts Movement, includes African lore and allusions to African religious beliefs in her fiction in ways that are both aesthetic and political assertions of Black Power. And in following with traditional (hegemonic) approaches to the American literary canon, other critics have emphasized Morrison’s biblical allusions. Indeed, religious traditions of both Africa and the West emerge throughout *Beloved*, as in all of her work, but emphasizing one over the other is divisive, propagating the kind of duality detrimental to personal and civic growth that the novel seeks to reconcile<sup>30</sup>. In examining

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<sup>29</sup> See Guth and Stave.

<sup>30</sup> In *Playing in the Dark* Morrison discusses cultural hegemony, stating, “I do not want to encourage those totalizing approaches to African-American scholarship which have no drive other than the exchange of dominations—dominant Eurocentric scholarship *replaced* by dominant Afro-centric scholarship” (8). Intellectual domination,

*Beloved*, it is essential to come to terms with what Morrison presents as African *and* American, redefining American. We must not choose a single lens to look through as we read, but overlap them as color slides that allow us to see the novel in its true hue and complexity, or else view them simultaneously as a kaleidoscope, as variegated as American society has come to be.

Recognition of the significance of the Judeo-Christian allusions need not be an attempt to downplay or whitewash the richness and importance of African tradition in *Beloved*; nor should delving into the African cosmology of the novel threaten its designation as quintessentially American.<sup>31</sup> Often, instances arise in *Beloved* where both the biblical and African may be read, but such concurrence is too often ignored in favor of a more simplified, monocultural reading. This is not to say that culture clashes in the form of religion do not also occur in the novel, or that Morrison does not depict any contrast. On the contrary; just as the narrative voice fluctuates between characters and settings, so does it navigate the othernesses of spiritual realms. It is in fluidity, not fixity, that spiritual growth can occur, that trauma can be overcome.

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arising from cultural domination, notes Morrison, begins as "invasion and conquest" but slowly shifts to seem as "revelation and choice." How we read, what scholarship we endorse, is therefore akin to political action.

<sup>31</sup> Too many critics are wont to consider non-ethnic, white, and Judeo-Christian the paradigm for American literature. *Playing in the Dark* asks, "What parts do the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction of what is loosely described as 'American'?" (9). *Beloved* helps to reconstruct Americanism.

**“From the Religious Back to the Spiritual”: Sacred Self and Rehabilitation in *The Color Purple***

Alice Walker herself has called attention to the spiritual in the novel or, to be more precise, the spiritual in contrast with the religious in her prefatory remarks on her novel. In her 1992 preface,<sup>32</sup> she states, “Whatever else *The Color Purple* has been taken for during the years since its publication, it remains for me the theological work examining the journey from the religious back to the spiritual.” Walker expresses wonder “that a book that begins ‘Dear God’” has had its spiritual themes largely disregarded. Walker goes on:

Or perhaps it is the pagan transformation, of God from patriarchal male supremacist into trees, stars, wind, and everything else, that camouflaged for many readers the book’s intent: to explore the difficult path of someone who starts out in life already a spiritual captive, but who...breaks free into the realization that she... is a radiant expression of the heretofore perceived as quite distant Divine.

In her conception of the text, patriarchy plays a role in problematizing closeness with God, but it is not central to the novel. Critical discussion of the novel, however, tends to read the spiritual in service of struggles with patriarchy instead of vice versa. In other words, scholars address the roles of religion and spirituality as manifestations of oppressive structures and liberation from those structures-- the characters’ religion is merely symptomatic of racist and sexist forces. Walker’s preface invites readers to flip that perspective, to consider how the characters’ relationships with God influence their experiences of traumatic oppression and power.

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<sup>32</sup> I refer to the 1982 Harvest Book edition.

More than a decade later, in her 2006 introductory essay to the novel titled "Tsunamis and Hurricanes: A Book about God vs. the God Image," Walker expresses perplexity that religion does not figure more prominently in the criticism:

...it still puzzles me that *The Color Purple* is so infrequently discussed as a book about God. About "God" versus "the God image." After all, the protagonist Celie's first words are "Dear God." Everything that happens during her life, spanning decades, is in relation to her growth in understanding this force.... We grow in our understanding of what "God/Goddess" means and is by the intensity of our suffering, and what we are able to make of it...

In this introduction, she ruminates on the evolution of black spirituality, or rather devolution, from her ancestor's worship of Nature to belief in "a God designed to guide and further the desires of another people, a God who thought of blackness as a curse." Here, Walker discusses the trauma of the slave trade on the spiritual lives of black people-- who were forced to give up their own beliefs, who "were assumed, like women and cats, to have no soul," and who gradually began to adopt the whites' Christian religion out of desperation-- and points to a way of redefining the meaning of God that restores the broken spirit, by shedding the "God image" and getting back to a God that is "All Present and All Powerful." Just as the 1992 preface indicates male dominance is a significant obstacle to overcome in a liberating spiritual journey, here we find that race plays a parallel, or perhaps more accurately, intertwined role as obstacle for the spirit. More specifically, continued acceptance of the "God image" rendered by white supremacists keeps black people in a certain kind of bondage; refusal of God in the image of the

oppressor puts one closer in touch with the spirit that loves and accepts all life, according to Walker.

Taken together, these authorial remarks, written in 1992 and 2006 respectively, reveal that Alice Walker locates male dominance and racism as origins for Celie's trauma, and religious belief as it extends from these same sources only reinforces her suffering. Here I take up Walker's call to examine what her text has to say about "'God' versus 'the God image,'" and how conceptions of God are correlated with suffering on multiple levels. It is when Celie is able to reinscribe God with a more authentic spirituality that embraces, not oppresses, her blackness, gender, and sexuality, that she transcends her traumatic experience. Because spirituality wins out over racism and male dominance (and their form as institutionalized religion) by the novel's end, theological strivings should be thought of as the primary function of the novel and its social issues as important factors that qualify these strivings.

Issues of identity are important to consider in relation to the novel's depiction of trauma and its religious and spiritual motifs. As Toni Morrison writes, "A criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only 'universal' but also 'race-free' risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist" (*Playing* 12). An easy pitfall in reading trauma in Walker's novel is over-universalizing it, viewing it as common to all women, regardless of color. Margaret Kamitsuka points out, "In some ways, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* almost invites color-blind readings from a white readership. Because of the personal, introspective, timeless tone created in Celie's letters to God, white readers are tempted to forget that Celie's story begins in pre-World War II, rural, segregated South" (50). Similarly, according to Christopher Lewis, black readers downplay queer themes when they view them as in conflict with the "politics of hegemonic blackness," in other words believing that lesbianism disempowers black

pride (159). This is also universalizing because it views Celie's trauma as common to all black women, choosing to ignore other aspects of her identity. Even Walker herself universalizes Celie's suffering to some extent, stating in the 2006 introduction that "a 'Pa' and/or a 'Mister' [Celie's personal scourges] are likely to turn up in anybody's life. They might be wearing the mask of war, the mask of famine... of caste, race, class, sex, mental illness, or disease" ("Tsunamis"). While it is true that Celie's situation is gendered and racialized, Walker also allows for an interpretation of Celie as a universal vessel of human suffering and redemption. It is important, however, to abstract Celie's experience only after considering her particularity as a queer black woman, for the full significance of her journey from God image to God is connected to her experience of identity. Therefore, I examine spirituality as it pertains to Celie's particular experience, with attention to intersections of gender, race, and sexuality.

Throughout much of the novel, Celie's belief in God is directed toward the image of a man who is "big and old and tall and graybearded and white" (*The Color Purple* 194), and it is this faith in an ultimate form of white, male dominance that locks Celie into her powerless identity. What I mean is, in situating God as white and male, Celie must needs identify herself as "other," black and female, and thus doubly inferior to Him. Because Celie cannot see herself in this God's image, she comes to see herself as in opposition to it, which leads to powerful feelings of helplessness and subjection. After forsaking the God she has been writing to since she was a child, Celie confides to her best friend and lover, formerly her husband's mistress, Shug Avery, that God "give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I way, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown" (192).

Celie's God image negates her power, cursing and victimizing her. Walker notes the insidiousness of being indoctrinated to believe God is a white man: "It is possible to visit black churches in the South, even now, and find the object of devotion to be a very pale Jesus Christ, blue eyes raised toward his adored (assumed bigger and whiter) father in heaven. This was the same adoration of himself that the slave master drilled into his slaves" ("Tsunamis"). The God image is used as a tool of domination and persecution. So long as Celie complies with this figuration of God, she will be vulnerable to its significations on her and the resulting trauma.

The site of trauma in the novel is the black, female body. From the first page readers are exposed to unspeakable sexual violence toward a young girl who is immediately identifiable linguistically as poor, uneducated, and black. She has been impregnated twice by the man she believes to be her father, and the babies have been either killed or sold, according to Celie's first letters. She watches her mother die cursing her for sleeping with her husband. Furthermore, Celie reveals she is now sterile, likely due to habitual rape and beatings. Celie's matter-of-fact tone as she reports her story to God is enough to shatter the heart, but all of this bespeaks a highly particular condition: the black woman's body.<sup>33</sup> Though never explicitly mentioned, white racism in the form of Jim Crow plays a major role in Celie's powerlessness in terms of her ability to speak out, get help, educate herself to understand her situation, or recover her own children.<sup>34</sup> And, of course, she is victimized at the hands of men. Ironically, Celie's only

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<sup>33</sup> But lest we naively think Celie's story also places her in a particular time period, it is well worth mentioning that her experiences echo the experiences of female slaves who endured rape by their owners and were impregnated only to have their children sold off. Moreover, Celie does not represent an era of the past; Sapphire's 1996 novel *Push* directly and indirectly alludes to Celie as the protagonist Claireece Precious Jones, an illiterate teenager, has two children who are the product of rape by her father.

<sup>34</sup> Kamitsuka notes that the racial dimension of the novel is most clearly highlighted in the character of Sofia and her subplot, wherein she refuses to bow to white authority, is beaten, jailed, and forced to live and work for the white couple who had her arrested (51-2).

comfort is in writing letters to a God who resembles, in her mind, the very characteristics of those who have perpetrated her suffering in His whiteness, maleness, and deafness to her illustrated in Celie's admonition, "You must be sleep" (177). Celie's God image, and according to Shug the God image most Americans hold, functions to uphold white, male supremacy, not help recover from it.

In addition to physical trauma, in simply being female Celie incurs trauma of which she is not consciously aware. Barbara Christian observes that Walker's characters who are victims of sexism nevertheless protect the black men who victimize them, out of feelings of responsibility toward their (black) people ("Alice Walker" 467). Celie does not comprehend how her abuse at the hands of her stepfather and husband stem from the broader problem of sexism. Similarly, she is not aware of her personal traumas as they situate in the context of racism. Bettye Parker-Smith agrees with Christian's analysis of tendencies within black society of women to bear the burden of sexism in order not deviate from the (male-dominated) black community as a whole. Parker-Smith, however, goes a step further than Christian to offer that Walker's women characters "in day-to-day existence... carry out a plot constructed by white society (male and female) and choreographed by Black men" (479). In their willingness to do so, argues Parker-Smith, "Black men recognize their vulnerability and use them as their 'punching bag'" (481). Certainly Pa and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Celie's main abusers, take their power from Celie's being disenfranchised. Celie keeps their secrets, which are open secrets, out of fear, demonstrated in the novel's opening line, "You better not never tell nobody but God" (1). While it is no conscious act on Celie's part to protect her abusers, it is the wider white patriarchal system that has denied her any power or even the ability to perceive the possibility of her own

power, a system that is upheld by the God image institutionalized in the Christian church. Thus, Celie's faith in God is complicit in her keeping silent, since as a devotee of the church she feels obligated to uphold its authority and the authority it confers upon her oppressors.

Walker aligns Celie to Christ in her suffering to demonstrate the difference between God image and God that will be necessary for Celie to understand before she can overcome her trauma. She endures this trauma of her past, her putatively incestual rape and loss of two children, and present, domestic violence, in silent prayers that go unanswered. Her initial notion that "long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along" (17) eventually gives way to feeling forsaken by a God who "must be asleep" (177). In the scene in which she visits the jail to tend to Sofia, her stepson's wife, who has been brutally beaten for "Sassing the mayor's wife" (84), she is the Christ healing and washing the feet of the sinner: "I... take out comb and brush, nightgown, witch hazel and alcohol and I start to work on her. The colored tendant bring me water to wash her with, and I start at her two little slits for eyes" (87). She raises Lazarus in the form of a mortally ill Shug, "sicker than my mama was when she die" (47), but rather than calling Shug out of her tomb, Celie's nurturing capacities Shug to abruptly sing an original song "Like what the preacher tell you its sin to hear" (53) humbly empowering Shug instead of calling attention to her own role as savior. The parallels between Celie and Jesus underscore two important points: one, that in holding a view of God/Christ as (white) man, Celie suffers a spiritual trauma of feeling forsaken and thus more vulnerable, and secondly, that the actions and not the image of Christ are valid and might be validating for Celie. Celie imagines God is different or indeed opposite of her self-image, and in effect she experiences detachment from her spiritual source. But Walker illustrates that though Celie sees herself as unlike God, her spirit is

actually closely aligned with the Divine. Barbara Christian, noting also Celie's Christ-like martyrdom, states in "Alice Walker: The Black Woman Artist as Wayward" that "What she [Celie] needs is to share her burdens, be taken off the cross, and find a way to save herself. She does find a way and it works because, as she discovers, *God is herself*" (490). It takes time for Celie to make the distinction between the God image she has always held and an emancipatory understanding of God and spirit that ends her trauma.

When Celie learns the truth of her past, that her biological father had been lynched, that it was her stepfather who had raped her, and that her two children were alive, she renounces God until Shug shows her the error in doing so, revealing to her the difference between the (false) God image and God. What Celie needs to renounce, according to Shug, is her image of God: "When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest. You mad cause he don't seem to listen to your prayers. Humph! Do the may listen to anything colored say?" (195). Shug mentors Celie in a spiritual awakening wherein Celie comes to understand that her spiritual energies have been misplaced by personifying God as a white man. Shug helps her relocate God within the self:

God ain't a he or a she, but a It... I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It... My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. (195-6)

Shug's conception of God is nature-based and omnipresent, in ears of corn or the color purple. Her teachings slowly raise the veil of the God image from Celie's eyes, so that "Mr. \_\_\_'s evil sort of shrink. But not altogether" (197); in other words, her suffering begins to subside as she finds her place in the world is at one with, not separate from or subservient to, the Divine. The consequences of her new thinking are immediate, as she asserts her new power by standing up to Mr. \_\_\_ when he tries to prevent her from going to Memphis with Shug (199). Being freed from the patriarchy of religion has released her from patriarchal bonds well beyond the church's scope.

Shug's, and now Celie's, beliefs about God are what have allowed Shug to lead a comparatively free lifestyle. In relation to the world of white supremacy, black oppression, and misogyny, Shug seems to be unaffected. Thomas Marvin argues that one reason is Shug is atypical from other women in the novel is her ability to "[cross] boundaries which usually separate the sacred and the profane" by bringing the spiritual into her "ostensibly secular" life (414-15). Marvin calls Shug's brand of spirituality a "blues conversion" whereby she has taken God beyond the threshold of the church to find the sacred in all things, demonstrated most concretely in her performances as a blues singer, a profession that had been traditionally condemned by Christians who thought the music's content sinful. Indeed, Shug challenges the distinction between sacred and secular when she tells Celie that enjoying sex, for example, is one method of adoration because "God made it. Listen, God love everything you love" (*The Color Purple* 196). Marvin notes similarities between Shug and West African *orishas*, particularly Legba, the spirit associated with music "who opens the door to the spiritual world and provides opportunities for the social and psychological growth of the individual" (412). Shug Avery acts

as Celie's spiritual guide. Triangulating African religion, blues tradition, and *The Color Purple*, Marvin sees the sacred in Walker's novel as a way to subvert oppression by placing spirituality outside of the realm the white church establishment. Shedding the God image brings Shug closer to God and allows her not only relative freedom, but empowerment in a corrupt world.

The concept of God infusing all things is characteristic of African philosophy. As John S. Mbiti points out, "Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life" (2). Shug's perception of an ubiquitous God is decidedly African, and so her assertion of African dimensions of her identity frees her from the rules of the white Christian church. She remains unmarried, does not attend church, sleeps with various men and women, performs the blues, and has the power to travel and live independently. Although initially it seems Shug's morals are simply less constricted without the traditional God image, she makes it clear that her feminine power is also contingent on renouncing that image:

You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall. Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock. (197)

Her way of knowing God holds the same potentialities for Celie, who "[tries] to chase that old white man out of [her]head" (197). Seeing the color purple, a metaphor for freedom from oppression and taking pleasure in life, hinges on giving up the God image.

This is not to say that Celie's disavowal of Christian iconography is either a disavowal of Christian metaphysics or full embrace of African tradition. Shug, the priestess of her own religion, still uses the Hebrew/Christian affirmation of Amen, believes in original sin-- "I is a sinner, say Shug. Cause I was born" (193)-- and takes far more issue with white church establishment and its dogma, including the bible, than with Christian philosophy. Also, Celie's sister Nettie, a conservative Christian, is presented as a good and likeable character. It is in Nettie's narrative, in fact, that we find implied criticism of African religion. Walker's fictional Olinka tribe, who worship the roofleaf, may superficially seem to align better with Shug and Celie's nature-based spirituality, but there are several parallels between Olinka religion and patriarchal qualities of the Christian church. These include Nettie's observations that the religious leaders were "some very old men who looked like the church elders back home," that women and children were made to sit in the back during their tribal ceremony, and that wives were the property of their husbands (*The Color Purple* 152-4). Most significant is the roofleaf, which like the white, male image of Christ, is revealed to be an icon, an unattainable ideal with its own dogma attached. Walker, therefore, does not use Nettie's African setting to contrast with the American South. Rather, the two places are remarkably similar, most notably in the patriarchal structures of society. If Celie is oppressed in the South, women are not better off in Africa; here, for example, Walker demonstrates her disgust for female circumcision through Tashi, a member of the Olinka tribe who undergoes the custom against her will.<sup>35</sup> The Olinka also kill women they accuse of witchcraft. In criticizing the Christian church, Walker does not

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<sup>35</sup> Walker's novel *Possessing the Secret Joy* (1993) retells the story of Tashi, who in this text chooses to undergo the operation but suffers a psychological breakdown. Walker further exposes female genital mutilation in her 1993 book-turned-documentary *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*.

simply romanticize African religion as a suitable alternative. Rather, she shows that patriarchy in any guise results women's trauma and oppression everywhere.

Just as Celie discovers that her original conceptions of God were lacking, Nettie goes through the same crisis of faith. Working for Christian missionaries in Africa, Nettie at first sees Africans as white colonizers do; they are "riddled by disease and sunk in spiritual and physical confusion. They believe in the devil and worship the dead" (139). John Cullen Gruesser describes Nettie's experience as attempting to identify across borders but realizing they are extending cultural hegemony of Christianity (153). Nettie sees herself as a woman of God, but has not plumbed the depths of her religion. As she aids Reverend Samuel and his wife in their mission to convert the Olinka, she is naive about her role in colonizing Africa with white man's education and religion. It is only when she sees white men physically come to exploit the land and colonize commercially that she gains insight into the unwitting part she has been playing in oppressing the Olinka and understands why "they can see how powerless we and our God are" (*The Color Purple* 227); regardless of whether the Olinka adopted the religion, they are treated as inferior as their land and roofleaf are destroyed. The colonizing religion was simply a foot in the door for white domination. Nettie, like Celie, learns how both women and blacks are excluded from church doctrine and are indeed hurt by it. And, like Celie, she determines to set down her own spiritual path:

God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone-- a roofleaf or Christ-- but we don't. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us...

And perhaps Samuel and I will found a new church in our community that has no idols in

it whatsoever, in which each person's spirit is encouraged to seek God directly... (*The Color Purple* 257)

Nettie's thoughts here distinctly echo those of Shug when Shug offers Celie her spiritual philosophy, further highlighting Walker's distinction between God image and God, between religion and spirituality. *The Color Purple* suggests organized religion of any denomination as a political and hierarchical structure is detrimental to personal freedom.

It is worth examining how the character of Sofia fits in with the novel's theme on the subject of spirituality and freedom, as she has considerable personal power that defies sexism and racism and an apt foil for Shug Avery. Sofia is the wife of Celie's stepson Harpo, who dominates her husband and fights back physically when he tries to beat her into submission. She describes how she has stood up to male dominance her whole life: "I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (40). Her last statement is of course pertinent to Celie, who knows well the dangers of men in her family. What separates the two women's experiences, however, is Sofia's insistence on standing up for herself while Celie takes a passive role, hoping for divine intervention. From this perspective, Celie's faith does indeed ensure trauma at the hands of her stepfather and husband. Sofia, a secular woman whose only recognition of God in the novel is an expression of shock when Celie tells her she makes love to God (*The Color Purple* 220), relies solely on herself and is successful-- mostly. When Sofia refuses to bow to the mayor's wife and attacks the mayor after he slaps her, she goes to jail for a period, then becomes an indentured servant of sorts to the mayor's family as recompense. Her punishment goes on for years, and Sofia's bitterness toward white people grows to be as passionate as her will. Sofia

may be a model for black, female power in her defiance of oppressive authorities and strength to overcome her trials, but it is clear that she will likely continue fighting for the rest of her life. She lacks something that Celie, the unlikely heroine, has found, and which Shug has long had-- a spirituality that allows her peace and harmony with others. Discussing with Mr. \_\_\_\_ the issue of race in relation to African beliefs according to Nettie, Celie is taken by the idea that "the only way to stop making somebody [one race] the serpent is for everybody to accept everybody else as a child of God, or one mother's children, no matter what they look like or how they act" (275) because it aligns with her and Shug's philosophy of the Divine in all things rather than a projection of God as a dominant power. It is this spiritual concept that allows Celie to step out of the frays between men and women and whites and blacks that Sofia will continue to be drawn into. It is what allows Celie to sit civilly on her front porch with Mr. \_\_\_\_ to discuss such matters, after enduring years of his brutality, the sources of her trauma resolved.

Although it is important to examine *The Color Purple* in terms of the differences within and among characters to be sensitive to identity-related issues brought forth in the novel, we must do so with the fact in mind that Celie's spirituality seeks to deconstruct those differences. Margaret Kamitsuka calls for using Judith Butler's poststructuralist theories that question the concepts of natural sex and gender as a way to read the novel, specifically the Celie's performative sexuality (64). Kamitsuka contends that viewing identity as performative in the novel allows readers to explore identity politics and particularize characters' experiences while also maintaining universalizing interpretations, since all identities are performed, not essential. Bearing this in mind, it is not difficult to understand how Celie undergoes such radical changes in her self-perception upon discovering Shug's version of religion. Shug challenges Celie to see

how her identity and place in society has been culturally constructed when she offers, “How come the bible just like everything else they make, all about them doing one thing and another, and all the colored folks doing is getting cursed?” (194). Perceiving herself as a willing actor, *performer*, in the religious narrative wherein white men dominate black men and women, and black men rightfully dominate black women, ignites a refusal in Celie to continue fulfilling prescribed roles for race, gender, and sexuality.

It is from the moment that Celie accepts a God that is neither male nor female but an “It” that Celie’s spirituality, and in turn her life, takes on an androgynous dimension. Lori Duin Kelly observes that *The Color Purple* is rife with androgynous imagery and characterizations, for example in the relationship between Sofia and Harpo wherein Sofia shows many masculine characteristics while Harpo displays traditionally feminine traits (Kelly 8). Kelly argues, “The challenge to the conventional view of male-female behavior...is a significant step in the religious re-education and in the development of [Celie’s] individuality.” Challenging hegemonic views of gender roles destabilizes the power of the dominant gender. It is no coincidence that Celie becomes a successful business person making pants for women, almost scandalous for her time. Kamitsuka also reads androgyny when she states that Celie’s desire for Shug “destabiliz[es] the heterosexually linked man-woman binary” (64). Understanding God as present in all things dismantles binaries and hierarchies by bestowing equal value on everything. The androgynous nature of Shug and Celie’s religion, then, is not only a way to recover from traumas inflicted by racism and misogyny and the institutions that wield them, but paves a way toward a life, if not free of pain, devoid of personal feelings of oppression.

*The Color Purple* presents women and men who are subject to traumas perpetrated by sexist, racist, homophobic social institutions, the most prominent of which is religion. The most obvious villains in the story are its men, who assault women viciously and mercilessly. They have the backing of patriarchal world views, which themselves are supported by biblical scripture and/or religious traditions. Upon closer inspection, however, we find that men, too, are victims within the systems they dominate. At the end of the novel, for instance, Mr. \_\_\_ reveals that he was forced into his first marriage by his father, gave up sewing because people laughed at him, and is finally able to empathize with Celie's loss of Shug. Most significantly, he contemplates his humanity as he accepts responsibility for his treatment of Celie. These examples of Mr. \_\_\_'s suffering, though far from the extent of Celie's, expose the wounds of sexism on men, who lose their spirits in their obligation to uphold masculine power. This holds true for Harpo, as well, who hates himself for beating his beloved Sofia. Walker suggests that though these men may be closer to the God image in physical resemblance, in exercising their dominance they are spiritually out of touch.

In *The Color Purple*, Walker looks back and forth, through the alternating narratives of Celie and Nettie, at the religions of America and Africa... and walks away from both. Her enlightened characters find that traditional religions are persecutory and oppressive, mainly because they put forth God images that do not reflect the vast majority of worshippers. What is the spiritual way forward for men and women, especially those disenfranchised by the ascendant powers? Ironically, it is the church-- but the church as Shug Avery defines its mission, "to share God, not find God" (*The Color Purple* 193). In this version of church Shug and Celie are missionaries sharing their understandings of God that they might liberate others. They liberate

Mary Agnes, for example, empowering her to become a singer. Celie smokes marijuana with Sofia and Harpo to introduce them to her new way of talking to God, internally, and the two of them experience a conversion: "Yeah, they say. That make a lots of sense" (221). She also shares her thoughts with a newly open-minded Mr. \_\_\_\_ as they sew on the porch together, unlikely allies at the end of their long journeys.

## Conclusion

It follows almost naturally that novels describing deep emotional trauma would incorporate some religious content, since religion is one of the most common means of coping. It is also logical that stories about African Americans would have multicultural themes, including some representation of various religious traditions. At the intersection of these two statements is the question at the heart of this project: How does complex religious imagery relate to trauma in these novels? For not only do Marshall, Morrison, and Walker combine sacred elements in interesting ways, but they do so for unanticipated reasons. Marshall suggests that the open embrace of diasporic religions and the flexibility to navigate cultural and spiritual realms is crucial to overcoming traumatic double-consciousness. In *Beloved*, the syncretic nature of Morrison's religious imagery invites appreciation for multiplicity, avoiding polarization of the human spirit that causes traumatic duality. Finally, *The Color Purple* holds up two religious traditions usually presented as oppositional and proposes they are not only similar in their oppressive capacities but should both be discarded in favor of an internal sense of holiness and direct connection with nature and God. In none of these masterworks does the author portray religion as coping mechanism; in fact, the role of religion in these texts is often added complication for their characters, whose identities are, at best, unstable. Nor is it proposed that one must single out a religious tradition in order to determine a fixed identity or solve conflict. How these characters and their authors navigate complicated spiritual matters exposes ways of also approaching trauma that lead to recovery. Although religion on its own is not given the power to heal, *Praisesong for the Widow*, *Beloved*, and *The Color Purple* each offers an alternative perspective of trauma and trauma recovery revealed through religious elements.

Syncretic spirituality offers a model in its wholeness, its rejection of polarization and divisiveness, with which to negotiate trauma. In all cases, reading religion comprehensively, multiculturally, is crucial to discerning the most central ideas about the prevailing human spirit.

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