

Women Who Know Things: African Epistemologies, Ecocriticism, and Female Spiritual Authority in the Novels of Toni Morrison

by

Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie, DA
Department of English and Modern Languages
Bowie State University

Dr. Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie (kselassie@bowiestate.edu) is an Iyalorisa or priest of Obatala in the Yoruba Spiritual Tradition and a Mama Nganga in the Kongo spiritual system. Currently she is an Associate Professor of English at Bowie State University in the Department of English and Modern Languages. She is the author of "I Got a Home in Dat Rock: Memory, Orisa, and Yoruba Spiritual Identity in African American Literature" in *Orisa: Yoruba Gods and Spiritual Identity in Africa and the Diaspora* edited by Toyin Falola published by Africa World Press.

Abstract

In her novels, Toni Morrison mediates the distance between African belief systems and western hemispheric realities of Africans in America. Repeatedly, Morrison illustrates how African women, soul workers, continue to employ symbolic, temporal and cultural codes reflective of African traditional religions and indigenous values. Sculpting spiritual landscapes emblematic of Yoruba, Kongo and various African spiritual systems, Morrison imbues her work with sacred features to simultaneously recover ancestral memory and engender the individual's and community's future endeavors. Asserting the circularity of and concentricity of African cosmologies, Morrison links her narratives with the sacred, symbolized by elements of nature to cleanse the community, re-integrate the African personality, and restore cohesion. Eco-critical ideas will be explored with a brief examination of Morrison's literary creation of spiritual spaces in the "wilderness" that regard particular animals and plants as emblems of the divine ascribing particular powers to these objects in ceremonial acts of propitiation and other ritual processes enacted by female spiritual officiants representing the Mama Nganga of the Kongo spiritual tradition and the Iyalorisa of the Yoruba belief system.

“Remember this: against all that destruction some yet remained among us unforgetful of origins, dreaming secret dreams, seeing secret visions, hearing secret voices . . .”

—Ayi Kwei Armah

From their earliest contact with African people, Europeans posited that the African's closeness to nature meant distance from God. To tame, domesticate, civilize, de-nature, and de-spirit Africans became the mission of American plantation owners and the process to affect control over an African population, which in many southern states outnumbered their European-Americans enslavers. These attempts at religious acculturation also occurred in the North as well. However, early written records attest to African people's maintenance of a spiritual connection with the land and the power they derived from these associations. In *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, Painter comments on Truth's mode of worship and bond with nature, “On an island in a stream, she built herself a brush arbor, much like the outdoor shrines of black southerners, and worshipped God as though she were in a West African river cult” (Painter 7). Instructed by her mother to pray to the God who lives in the sky “under the sparkling vault of heaven,” Truth's daily petitions “in the noise of the waters” is explicated by Bockie who notes in *Death and The Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief* that a person can pray at a river, a tree, or stones because of the all-pervading power of God. He recounts finding remnants of this approach to prayer among African Americans (Bockie 35). Sojourner Truth's spiritual aptitude is legendary and her testimony of not being able to read books juxtaposes her confidence in divining or “reading people.”

The supremacy in which Truth values her intuition marks an early literary avowal of spiritual continuities. Key to this connection with her spiritual vocation is her symbolic relationship with the natural world. Evidence of this abiding reverence for the power of nature abounds in literature representing its beauty and mythic potential to save African people from the traumatic terrain of American racial landscapes. By connecting Africa with America, African people have extended its geo-political boundaries, fortified the transported spiritual culture, and sustained the inter-spatial self and the collective self, which characterize African identity. Morrison reiterates these ideas in her literary figurations. Discussing these ontological imperatives in a 1988 *Présence Africaine* interview with Christiana Davis, Morrison insists: “There's a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is ours” (Davis 142). Morrison is one of the ancient mothers whose fertile prose and careful craft cultivate a literary “garden” where haints, mojos, fixing folks, and root-workers are unashamedly part of the spiritual landscape. The questions I raise in this essay are: What do these spiritual terrains look like? What is contained within them? What are the epistemological figurations of Morrison's female healers? Finally, what do they know, how do they know and what are the purposes for that knowledge?

In answering these questions, my goal in this paper is to define and interpret a few underlying spiritual realities transcending the written word and to provide a context for the deeper spiritual meaning and African female authority beyond literary events in connection with Morrison's spiritual-ecological impulse. In short, I want to share a few things that I *know* regarding Morrison's imaginative inscription and incorporation of indigenous knowledge, which allow characters to gain meaning in their respective literary environments. Just as nature seeks to establish balance and harmony with its message of interconnectedness, Morrison establishes the relationship to women and the land. Eco-critical ideas will be explored with a look at how Morrison links her narratives with emblems of nature, followed by an analysis of how she ascribes certain powers to these phenomena in ceremonial acts of propitiation to restore community cohesion. In order to re-present Africa, my analysis of time includes a discussion of the holistic view of the universe, which honors the connectedness, and spiritual integrity of the environment consistent with African traditional belief structures.

Contesting the conventional linear, three-dimensional view of European thought as the only construction of reality, I define *diasporic time* as continued spiritual processes and events organized into "super" temporal experiences similar to the Kongo delineation of time. In *Slave Religion*, Raboteau asserts, that enslavers transported a large percentage of enslaved Africans from West Africa and from the Congo-Angola region (Raboteau 7). Bockie corroborates saying, "many essential characteristics of Kongo culture have survived among African Americans" (*Death and the Invisible Powers* xii). One of the influential ideas from the Ba Kongo people of Central Africa is the concept of time and the person's relationship to it. Morrison mediates the distance between African belief systems and western hemispheric realities of Africans in America by employing symbolic, temporal and narrative codes reflective of African traditional religions and indigenous epistemes, which cohere to African notions of time with its accompanying concepts of causality, unity, and origins. To illustrate, *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's first novel, is structured in four sections, emblematic of *dikenga dia Kongo*, the Kongo cosmogram.

One of the key symbols representing Kongo beliefs, *dikenga dia Kongo*, represents the cyclical journey of the soul. The symbol is depicted as a circle intersected at the midpoint by two lines one vertical and the other horizontal. The horizontal line dissecting the circle is known as kalunga, the "balancing plane for all existence" (Fu-Kiau 23). The space above the line is the upper world and below the line is the lower world or the spiritual world, the abode of the ancestors. As a result of these two intersecting lines four quadrants are formed epitomizing the four suns constructing the journey of a human being.

The southern axis is called *musoni* and represents beginnings—seeds and the color yellow. Moving counterclockwise the next point is called *kala* and corresponds to birth symbolized by the color black. At the top of the circle is *tukula* the sun of maturity and signified by the color red. The last quadrant is called *luvemba* and is characterized by the color white. Fu-Kiau asserts that “nothing exists that does not follow the cosmogram” (*African Cosmology* 27). The dams of time described in each of the cosmogram’s quadrants are delineations within the foundation for all time the *cosmic* realm.

Additionally, the Ba Kongo conceive of time as consisting of three other realms: the *natural* realm dealing with movements in nature, such as, growth, blooming, etc. and seasons; *vital* or cyclical time; and *social* time, which deals with interactions in society such as marriage, initiation, naming ceremonies, etc. (Fu Kiau 22). *The Bluest Eye* is structured in natural time beginning with the season of autumn, the season of dissolution. With its images of “dead grass in the field,” actions such as gleaning in urban coal fields, juxtaposed with the cosmic event of the protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, getting her first menses, the reader is prepared to traverse the cosmogram from maturity counterclockwise back to/towards the novel’s prologue signifying the death of Pecola’s baby.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison initiates her commitment to open up literary spaces where black beliefs and culture are the forms of influence. African people still believe in signs and the principle of causality relative to the natural world. Although pre-pubescent females Claudia and Frieda read the earth, indicated by their attention to its rhythms, patterns, and secret language noting, “We thought, at the time that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds¹ did not grow.” Here the epistemic idea concerns the correlation between ethics, morality and natural phenomena. Moreover, Morrison advances that planting is a spiritual creative activity and the resultant blossoms are dependent on ritual words. Claudia and Frieda’s attempt at magic using words indicates knowledge of the spoken word to contain vital force, the necessary spiritual element to make things happen. Furthermore, Morrison counters these assaults to the African personality such as Pecola’s perceived ugliness and her community’s confirmation of her aesthetic negation with her inscription of ritual performance and establishing continuities in belief using a gathering of cultural symbols.

Besides Claudia and Frieda, two of the novel’s characters, Aunt Jimmy and M’Dear, invoke the power of the circle to engender mythic memory. Aunt Jimmy, Cholly Breedlove’s great aunt, belongs to a group of women easily identified in fiction as one of the wise women tied to an African past. She is described as a woman “eating collard greens with her fingers, sucking her four gold teeth” and wearing an “asafetida bag around her neck . . . (TBE 132). The wearing of the asafetida bag² is another practice of Aunt Jimmy’s that indicates her being an African practitioner in addition to her remembrance of traditional naming practices.

When Cholly asks her, “*How come you all didn’t name me Samson?*” she replies, “*Your mama didn’t name you nothing. The nine days wasn’t up before she threw you on the junk heap. When I got you I named you myself on the ninth day*” (TBE 133). Evident in her response is that despite the disruption indicated by his mother’s abandonment of him, traditional customs are still upheld in naming practices and order *can* be restored through ritual and ceremony.

After having established Aunt Jimmy as a spiritually inclined woman, Morrison sets the stage for the intervention of a group of women to assist in her healing when she becomes ill. Morrison writes, “Friends came to see about her. Some made her camomile [*sic*] tea,” (TBE 135) offered advice, “Don’t eat no whites of eggs,” “Drink new Milk,” “Chew on this root” (TBE, 136). When none of these remedies worked to alleviate her suffering, they “decided to fetch” M’Dear” (TBE, 136). Displaying the dynamism of African culture, Morrison employs the idea of the *Mama Nganga* or female ritual officiant. Bockie discusses the function of an *Nganga*. “A [*sic*] nganga is regarded as the bridge between the communities of the dead and the living beings” (*Death and the Invisible* 66). He expounds on the idea of an *Nganga*.

*Among [*sic*] the Ba Manianga, a subgroup of Kongo people, nganga “denotes a physician or medical man, pharmacist, prophet, seer, visionary, fortune-teller, priest, and ndoki. He uses his kindoki to provide help rather than harm . . . [w]orking closely with an ancestral spirit; he sits above any imaginable kind of human power. He thereby becomes thereby the factotum and guardian of the community secrets. To some degree he lives in a world of his own. He [*sic*] is the last hope to whom the individual and the entire community turn in the time of despair” (67).*

Morrison re-inscribes the concept of female healer in *The Bluest Eye* and illustrates how African women continue to remember and, as a result, heal one another. Exemplifying the ways in which African indigenous culture, healing, and female authority combine to chart a course towards new levels of liberation; Morrison links the narrative to ritual in an attempt to restore balance in both the visible and invisible realms through the harnessing of spiritual energy. Reminding African people about the power of believing, Morrison locates M’Dear as a woman connected to the spiritual arts.

Morrison describes her as a “quiet woman who lived in a shack near the woods” TBE, 136). M’Dear’s proximity to the woods is identifiable spiritual indication of her ability to access the spiritual realm. The “woods” is a metaphor for a place dense with spirits and an abode for the invisible powers consistent with West and Central African spiritual traditions. Ras Michael Brown notes, besides its location as being rich with spirits, wooded areas provided Africans with the organic materials for healing and for the production of *minkisi* or charms (Brown 308).

One of the timeless earth mothers, M'Dear was a competent midwife and a decisive diagnostician. Few people could remember when M'Dear was not around. In any illness that could not be handled by ordinary means—known cures, intuition, or endurance—the word was always, “Fetch M'Dear.” (*TBE*, 136) In this portrayal, Morrison underscores the associative ideas connected with these ageless, women as the repositories of indigenous knowledge. African cultural and spiritual resistance was deliberate and determined. These remembered beliefs punctuated practice while publicly accommodating the impositions of various Christian denominations. This knowledge is augmented through spiritual insight and communication with the ancestral world—including the ancestral words (language) and spiritual forces by which people construct identity and accompanying life philosophies and practices. These healers have maintained traditional knowledge, despite the physical, psychic, cultural, political, economic, and spiritual censure of European Americans. As spiritual and cultural providers they protect the community and officiate at a variety of community gatherings.

M'Dear's physical description confirms her identity. “M'Dear loomed taller than the preacher who accompanied her. She must have been over six feet tall. Four big white knots of hair gave power and authority to her soft black face” (*TBE*, 136). As a spiritual idea, the four knots corresponds to the cosmological idea of the Kongo number of the cosmos and the Yoruba division of the world into four categories—*Òrìsà*, (Divine aspects of God) *osain* (plants), *eniyan* (human beings), and *egun* (ancestors). Additionally, the color white conveys the Yoruba concept of coolness that “characterizes covert power and action as well as affirms ritual purity, calmness, and patience—soothing feminine qualities” (Drewal, 81.)

Conscious reflection on characters and imperatives of black experience helps readers to reclaim, reconcile, renew, and recover cultural identity. Vicariously, they join the circle of women tending to Aunt Jimmy who reinforce African concepts of inter-subjectivity and mutuality. Serving in the capacity of healers under the guidance of M'Dear, these women had lived extraordinary lives that taught them to lie on the “edge.” I suggest that the domain of the “edge” indicates their having access to the spiritual power resident at the interstices between the Kalunga line and the world of the *Bakulu* (ancestors). Morrison describes the transition from being young when “their laughter was more touch than sound” to being mature women.

Then they had grown. Edging in life from the back door. Becoming. Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, 'Do this.' White children said, 'Give me that.' 'White men said,' 'Come here.' Black men said, 'Lay down.' The only people they did not take order from were black children and each other (emphasis added, 138).

Morrison describes the transition from the previous stage in this manner:

They were old. Their bodies honed, their odor sour. Squatting in a cane field, stooping in a cotton field, kneeling by a river bank, they had carried a world on their heads. They had given over the lives of their children and tendered their grandchildren. With relief they wrapped their heads in rags, and their breast in flannel; eased their feet into felt. They wee through with lust and lactation, beyond tears and terror (TBE, 139).

Having reached the status signified by being beyond “lust and lactation,” the women have, according to Yoruba belief, attained a concentration of vital force. According to Drewal “longevity implies secret knowledge and power sufficiently amplified to be transformative in both positive and negative ways” (*Gelede* 74). Armed with the ecological knowledge necessary to positively influence life, preserve order and prevent disharmony, these traditional pharmacologists provide the community with healing that continues to connect with the feminine principle of the land—*aiye*³ in Yoruba language. According to Grimes, “Ritualization is not just a symbolic way of pursuing survival, but is a quest for a specific style of being in our bodies and world” (39). Morrison expresses the power of M’Dear as a spiritual diagnostician consistent with her ritual posture and prognostications.

Standing straight as a poker, she seemed to need her hickory stick not for support but for communication. She tapped it lightly on the floor, as she looked down at Aunt Jimmy’s wrinkled face. She stroked the knob with the thumb of her right hand while she ran her left one over Aunt Jimmy’s body. The backs of her long fingers she placed on the patient’s cheek then placed her palm on the forehead. She ran her fingers through the sick woman’s hair, lightly scratching the scalp, and then looking at what the finger-nails revealed. She lifted Aunt Jimmy’s hand and looked closely at it—fingernails, back skin, the flesh of the palm she pressed with three fingertips. Later she put her ear on Aunt Jimmy’s chest and stomach to listen. At M’Dear’s request, the women pulled the slop jar from under the bed to show the stools. M’Dear tapped her stick while looking at them. “Bury the slop jar and everything in it,” she said to the women. To Aunt Jimmy she said, “You done caught cold in your womb. Drink pot liquor and nothing else (TBE 137).

With the spiritual stick, M'Dear is able to tap into the spiritual core of memory and communicate with her ancestors much as current practitioners of the Yoruba religion tap the *egun* (ancestor) stick on ancestor altars when placing food and ritually communicating with the deceased. Drewal and Drewal note the dimensions of spectacle as a fleeting transitory phenomenon that may be a “display or performance for the gods, ancestors, or the mothers; but it may also refer to mental images” (*Gelede* 1). They note that the Yoruba word for spectacle-- *iron*-- is coterminous with the words for mystical vision-- *ojuu iron*, remembrance-- *inuron*-- a mental recollection, and the act of seeing visions—*iruron*. By tapping into these spiritual codes M'Dear gains access to the root cause of Aunt Jimmy's dis-ease and immediately works towards the cure. Having “pulled” the information from the spiritual realm, she leaves Aunt Jimmy in the hands of the women.

M'Dear is accompanied in her healing endeavor by the preacher. Working in tandem, their conjoined presence indicates that there is no conflict between New World beliefs and Old World practices when it comes to insuring wellness for members of the community. As a wise woman, M'Dear's analogue in the Yoruba world would be the *Olòrìsà* and *Iyalòrìsà* of the Yoruba priesthood who preside over the major rituals concerning fertility, life, and death. As protectors and providers of culture, they are also specialists in preventative medicine including traditional pharmacology. Richard Schechner reminds us that since ritual is action, not thought, it must be performed (3); the women have to follow through on the treatment plan divined by M'Dear. “That evening the women brought bowls of pot liquor from black-eyed peas, from mustards, from cabbage, from kale, from collards, from turnips, from beets, from green beans. Even the juice from a boiling hog jowl” (*TBE* 137). Since energy from the spiritual plane must be brought to the physical plane, this is achieved through the use of gateways—where the physical realm meets the spiritual. In discussing the concept of spiritual portals and gateways, Fu-Kiau notes the ways in which foods contribute to the healing cycle asserting that plants are straws, which harness the energy from the earth and contain the vital essences of life. When human beings use them, the energy is transferred.⁴

This circle of women surrounding Aunt Jimmy and M'Dear proffering gifts of the earth or *aiye* portray village values that help protect the village from spiritual threat. In ritual, human beings are able to transcend themselves and communicate directly with the divine and petition or effect solutions with their proactive actions. Regarding the notion of *communitas*, Schechner argues that rituals are more than functional they are also experiences where people feel expanded in contact with others (Schechner 8). Having reached “old age”, the women are now situated to be spirit workers—a way to be “different” in the world. Ritual action is a primary way to denote difference as it is non-ordinary, done at special times in special places taking place “betwixt and between” life-stages serving as transformative bridges from one stage to the next. In these in-between there is a dialectical space to access different identities, meanings values, behaviors and power.

This literary inscription of difference is usually a reference to possessing the ability to “see” and to appreciate the value of signs. To illustrate, after Aunt Jimmy dies, the women set out to reconstruct the signs that should have provided foreknowledge of her “passing.” What did she die from?” “Essie’s pie” (*TBE* 140). In *Self-Healing*, Fu-Kiau takes into account that a person’s vitality can be affected by “what we are taught, what we see, and through what we eat (*Self-Healing*, 80). In spiritual culture, adepts are particularly vulnerable to certain foods that may be prescribed as taboo. For example, in the Yoruba traditional spiritual practices, most practitioners are generally cautioned against eating pumpkin because it is a plant or *ewe* used to heal a variety of illnesses. One woman recalled that when Aunt Jimmy had been feeling better prior to her death, “She was doing fine, I saw her the very day before. Said she wanted to bring me some black thread . . . I should of known just from her wanting black thread that was a sign” (*TBE*, 141). For these women, black thread was a sign of death that they should have paid more attention to. They recall, “Just like Emma.” “Member? She kept asking for thread. Dropped dead that very evening” (*TBE*, 141). These women, much like those in Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*, believe in the power of signs. Bambara writes “Every event is preceded by a sign.” Her description of Cora Rider as one of those women, “whose bed, kitchen table and porch swing were forever cluttered with three Wise Men, Red Devil, Lucky Seven, Black Cat, Three Witches, Aunt Dinah’s Dream Book, and other incense-fragrant softback [sic] books that sometimes resulted in a hit” (*The Salt Eaters*, 13).

Morrison continues her elaboration on spiritual causality in *Sula*, her second novel. Revealing the presence of African folks who know things, the opening sentence reads, “In that place where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots “to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood” (*Sula* 3). The inclusion of nightshade and blackberry, plants associated with pharmacopoeia used by “root workers” and healers, represents both cultural sign and archeological evidence that members of the community practice African spiritual traditions. For brevity, I will illustrate one example of this epistemological precognition. Described as a woman who knows things, Eva is distressed after Hannah’s death for not having recognized the signs that prefigured it. Alice Walker describes these women as those who . . . dreamed dreams that no one knew-not even themselves, in any coherent fashion—and saw visions no one could understand. They wandered or sat about the countryside crooning lullabies to ghosts, and drawing the mother of Christ in charcoal on courthouse walls (Walker 232).

Eva reconstructs the signs, which to the non-African mind may seem anachronistic. The first sign recounted is actually the second. At this juncture, a discussion of African ideas of time is warranted. Since time is cyclical within an African frame—that is not having a beginning or end time, the only way to understand it is in relation to events. It is central that Eva reconstructs the events in order of importance. The narrator says, “The second strange thing was Hannah coming into her room . . . with the “evil wondering”” (*Sula* 67). That Hannah would question her mother’s love is an unforgettable outrage and a major cosmic rupture. The narrator reports, “later she recalls the first strange thing:

But, before the second strange thing, there had been the wind, which was the first. The very night before the day Hannah had asked Eva if she had ever loved them, the wind tore over the hills rattling roofs and loosening doors. Everything shook, and although the people were frightened, they thought it meant rain and welcomed it. But the rain never came; the wind just swept through (*Sula* 73).

Besides being able to portend signs, Eva also has the ability to “see things” not apparent to others. Toward the end of the novel, when Nell Wright goes to visit Eva in the nursing home, Eva tells Nell that she saw what happened to Chicken Little. Eva stuns Nell with her clairvoyance, since Nell, herself, had erased her participation in the event from her memory. In fact, through Morrison’s use of dramatic irony, readers are equally unaware. Samuel Ogunyemi credits Eva’s knowledge of this event to a confession. He says, apparently Sula makes a confession to Eva to explain being distraught after Chicken Little’s death and during the funeral (Ogunyemi 131). His observation disallows the possibility that Eva is such a person who is capable of knowing things through dreams and visions, notwithstanding her insistence made in statements like, “Plum. Sweet Plum. He tells me things” (*Sula* 169). African spiritual traditions, the Yoruba, in particular, regard death as a transition from this present earthly life to another life in the land of the spirits. Consonant with her understanding of life’s continuation beyond the grave, Eva has the ability to communicate with Plum.

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison crafts Marie Therèse Foucault as the female healer who demonstrates the power of interacting with the natural, non-human world, and the agency of spiritual return. Disguised as the different “Marys” who come to L’ Arbre de la Croix to wash clothes for Valerian and Margaret Street and the assemblage of Black folk in their employment and under their patronage, Marie Therèse Foucault is a descendant of one of the blind horsemen and a swamp woman.

In African cultures, masks honor the deities and spirits of nature by helping to spiritually connect the community to the land, which in due course insures prosperity and fertility. Using the mask of an “illiterate” washwoman, she subverts the role of the colonizer to be the “source of all value judgment, “beauty, manhood, good, evil, justice and demonstrates that her value does not come from the interlopers to the island who “elevate themselves to God-like stature to be revered, awed and feared by the colonized people” (Memmi 149). Instead, Therèse’s identity comes from a deep reverence and connection to the land, not from aspiring to be like her employers, who like others before them have historically exploited her people and the land. Using the aesthetic strategy of masking, Morrison iterates the symbiotic idea that people and land are never separate. This message is not accessible to all the characters. This act of containment symbolized by Therèse’s mask also encodes knowledge such as family histories, myths, and morality to those inside the culture, those who call her by her *true* name.

Having encountered William Green (Son) in the spiritual domain of a dream, Therèse confirms his identity. Morrison reports, Therèse had seen him in a dream “smiling at her as he rode away wet and naked on a stallion” (104). She also knew of his presence “twelve days ago long before he left the trail of chocolate foil paper” (105). In the Yoruba divination system called *merindilogun*, twelve cowries facing upward represents the *odu* called *ejila*. The accompanying refrain of this *odu*, “the soldier never sleeps” is emblematic of *Sango* the thunder deity and the owner of cosmic justice. . Because of her spiritual frame of reference and sturdy cultural grounding, Therèse is situated to meet Son, and lead him to his destiny, to become one of the blind galloping horsemen.⁵ Throughout the novel, Morrison employs numerous references to *Sango* in the novel to extend this leitmotif.

After Son had tried hopelessly to fit into the secular world, Therèse accommodates him to find another way of being in the world, by ferrying him across a dark expanse of water to L’ Arbre de la Croix and by assisting him to know his laws, his ancient properties. Therèse says, “You can choose now”. . . “You can get free of her”. . . “Go there, choose them.” Son chooses, and at the end of the novel, he gallops towards himself and eternity. His becoming blind, like Therèse, gives Son the spiritual sight necessary to restore order to the natural world as he becomes one of the island’s blind horsemen and an avenger of justice.

In the opening chapter of *Song of Solomon* Morrison illustrates Pilate’s achievement of two ritual objectives in her mentoring of a male initiate. First, Pilate had been spiritually dispatched to not only herald his birth, but had also played a decisive role in facilitating his conception by “fixing” his father through the preparation of “roots.” Malidoma Somé speaks of pre-birth rituals where hearings with the fetus are held to determine who the soul is, the nature of his or her life mission, and to determine if some object is needed to assist the “becoming” child (Somé 20).

Pilate has been cosmically summoned to facilitate Milkman's birth. As a prelude to his birth, the ritual she performs prepares him for subsequent rituals enacted on his journey toward epic completion. Subsequently, Pilate sings the pre-birth song that prefigures Milkman's birth the following day at Mercy hospital.

Pilate informs Ruth of the eminent arrival of Milkman—saying “a little bird will be here in the morning” then resumes singing. Through song, Pilate ritually recreates the original flight when her grandfather Solomon surrendered to the air and prefigures the birth of a new “bird.” The narrator reports, “*Immediately the singing woman began again:*

*Sugarman done fly
O Sugarman done gone...*” (9).

Like a West Africa, djeli who recounts genealogies, sings praises, and chants epics at important events such as the installation of chiefs, weddings, and naming ceremonies, singing what the Yoruba call an *Oriki*, or lineage chants, Pilate chants the names of her ancestor, Solomon, and shares memories with the community at large.

Also, in the character Pilate, trained by a root-worker, Morrison continues her valorization of the natural healer and mid-wife. Morrison directs the reader's attention to the power of culture and the capacity of spirituality to re-center and heal African people. In Africa, the female healers were also known as midwives. One of the few spiritual roles permitted and reinforced during slavery was a midwife. Pilate remains linked with other African women through a deep and abiding morality and ethical consciousness representing the continuation and resonance of African culture, imagination of homelands, a sense of tradition, and history.

Pilate's grounding in African ancestral and spiritual culture matches his insistence on “riding backwards” and his preoccupation with things behind him. Pilate is Milkman's spirit double. In *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Eliade explains the nature of her agency,

Every ritual has a divine model, an archetype . . . The world that surrounds us, then, the world in which the presence and the work of man are felt—the mountains that he climbs, populated and cultivated regions, navigable rivers, cities, sanctuaries—all these have an extraterrestrial archetype, be it as a plan, as a form, or purely and simply as a “double” existing on a higher cosmic level. (21).

Pilate binds Milkman to the past and delivers him from his spiritual dilemma by reuniting him with the stories of his ancestors. In her narratives of the past, Pilate illuminates the shared patterns of familial history and supplies the fundamental stability for Milkman's unbalanced psyche. Only with a true knowledge of the past can he re-create the consciousness and sense of community indispensable for him to imagine a future.

By reconnecting him with his dead and living relatives, Pilate bridges the gap that separates Milkman as an individual and introduces him to a larger community of people to whom he has a collective responsibility. In this respect, Pilate functions as an *ndoki*, or one who knows a human's higher principles or knowledge. The manipulation of knowledge is "to assist one to become a winged person, a flier" (*African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo*, 33). As an archetypal companion, Pilate helps to coordinate the experiences and spiritual opportunities that Milkman agreed to prior to his physical birth. In this spiritual chiropractic relationship, she helps to integrate and align his soul with its destiny.

Morrison depicts Pilate and imbues her with a physical description and worldview that function with a corresponding aura of spirituality to establish her role as "pilot" for Milkman's flight to self-hood and social incorporation. Remembered by the people of Danville for her closeness to nature, they recall her as a "pretty woods-wild girl that couldn't nobody put shoes on" (*SOS* 236). Macon tells Milkman, "If you ever have a doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate. She just like Papa, and he looked like all them pictures you ever see of Africans. A Pennsylvania African. Acted like one too" (*SOS* 54). While in Shalimar, Milkman reflects that Pilate must have looked like the young girls of Shalimar—with "(w)ide sleepy eyes that titled at the corners, high cheekbones, full lips **blacker** than their skin, berry-stained, and long long necks" (**emphasis added**, *SOS* 266). Disrupting the racist meaning of black as being bereft of light, Pilate's blackness leads Milkman into the *light* of self-realization. Fu-Kiau notes the Ki-Kongo term, *kala* is associated with blackness. Furthermore, the idea of spiritual *Nganga* is connected with this force of blackness expressed in the following expressions, which define Pilate's character. *Kala/ba muntu*—be a human being, a helpful being, *kala/ba n'kisi a kanda*—be the community's medicine, *kala/ba nganga*—be a specialist, a true knower, a master, a doer, *kala/ba n'kingu a kanda*—be the principle of the community, *Kala/ba lembabzau kia kanda*—be the strongest of the community (*African Cosmology* 27).

In addition to singing as a ritual idea in her novels Morrison also employs dance as a way to bind her characters with nature. One of the most salient examples of the African cosmological idea, the ring shout emerged as the chief form of dance expression. In *Beloved*, Morrison represents this ritual as a way to heal African people and the land where their horrors occur. Since the reader is informed on the first page of the novel of Baby Suggs, her inclusion as a major character in the novel represents the perpetuity and enduring relation of the ancestor to the realm of the living. Baby Suggs, described as an "unchurched preacher" led every black man, woman, and child to the "Clearing—a wide open place cut deep in the woods" (*Beloved* 87). Knowledgeable of traditional practices a woman who also "knows things" she led the community in a cleansing ritual, a way for them to exorcise the trauma of their previous status as captives through the performance of dance.

Morrison writes, “In the heat of every Saturday afternoon she sat in the “clearing while the people waited among the trees,” “Then she shouted, “Let the children come!” and they ran from the trees toward her,” the woods rang” (87). These dances in the “Clearing” where Baby Suggs, holy, invited the people to dance in a counterclockwise fashion is the embodiment of ancestral remembrance and connects with the narrative’s principal theme, honoring the ancestors and the narrative’s principal conceit. Sterling Stuckey posits that the ring shout helped to consolidate identity. He writes, “The ring in which Africans danced and sang is the key to understanding the means by which they achieved oneness in America” (12). Ultimately, the ring shout can be read as a performative expression of the Kongo cosmogram—*dikenga dia Kongo* inscribed on the earth in a rhythmic fashion using the human body as text. Standing in the center of the circle, Baby Suggs functions as the center of community. Fu-Kiau illustrates the significance of her spiritual office in the Kongo proverb, *Mbungu a kanda va kati kwa nsi ye yulu*. He writes,

The center of the community is located between the above and below world. The reality of the cultural heritage of a community, i.e., its knowledge, is the experience of that deepest knowledge found between the spiritualized ancestors and the physically living thinkers within the community (African Cosmology 112).

Eliade explains the center as the “zone of the sacred” and the “zone of absolute reality.” In order to reach the center, a person has gone through some major initiations (*The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 17-18).

The Antelope or *Tji-wara* (*Chi-wara*) dance is another ceremonial performance in *Beloved*. When Sethe refers to her baby “in utero” as an antelope, “the little antelope rammed her with impatient hooves” (30) this causes her to recall a significant repressed memory. Morrison writes, “Oh, but when they danced and sometimes they danced the antelope. The men as well as the ma’ams, one of whom was certainly her own. They shifted shapes and became something other (30). Among the Bambara people of Mali this antelope called *Tji-wara* or *Chi-wara* (working animal) is said to have introduced agriculture to them. The mask of the *Tji-wara* worn by members of the Flanton society is danced in pairs, a man and woman in association with ritually preparing the ground for insuring germination of the seed and a good harvest (Segy, 148). Explaining the implication of the antelope within the matrix of Bantu culture, Zulu healer, Credo Mutwa says “The sable antelope is another sacred animal and for hundreds of years the Bantu have associated this animal with the human soul” (191). One of the oldest beliefs in the world found in cave paintings Mutwa notes that the female antelope suckling its young is the oldest symbol of fertility, pertaining to agriculture as well and incorporated in the worship of the Great Mother and the celestial formations (191).

Extending the conversation of the centrality of motherhood to the conversation of spiritual power it is interesting to note the ways in which Morrison employs the spiritual idea of the Great Mother or *Iyanla* in her depiction of the Yoruba *Òrìsà*, *Oshun*, the *Òrìsà* of childbirth. In *Jazz*, as Morrison employs Oshun's major symbol, the needle, she brings together two women who are not physically mothers—Violet Trace and Alice Manfred, but who have served in the African role as other mothers, what the Yoruba call *Ajé*. Washington notes that being an *Ajé* is more than the biological act of giving birth, it relates to sustaining creation (*Our Mothers* 17). In her pairing of Violet and Alice, Morrison suggests that an alternate way of constructing power and authority in women's space is through maintaining harmonious relationships between women and creating new avenues for understanding the special needs and concerns of women. As *Iya Lode*, one of *Oshun's* spiritual functions is binding and sewing society together. Using the image of the needle and its activity of stitching, Morrison helps the characters come to terms with the loose and unraveled ends in his or her individual lives, but, the readers also get a chance to stitch together their own discontinuous memories. Having great value although a small object, Morrison advances the needle's significance to repair the cultural breaches of African people rent asunder in North America.

To illustrate, the second time Violet visits Alice Manfred to get more information about Dorcas, Alice's young niece who had been previously shot by Violet's husband, Joe, the narrator reveals the Alice "was irritated by the thread running loose from her sleeve, as well as the coat lining ripped in at least three places she could see" (82). From this observation, she realizes that Violet needs healing. Violet is in need of repair. She says, "Take that dress off and I'll stitch up your cuff" (82). Violet, frayed and broken in spirit makes her way to the daily appointments with Alice who repairs not only Violet's worn clothes, but also opens up something to heal her own loose threads, (mind). Morrison informs us that Violet's coat lining is repaired too, and her cuffs are secure. (83). revealing the extent of her healing, which also occurs through the exchange of life stories between she and Alice. Similarly, Violet's maternal grandmother, True Belle, a woman who stitched by firelight, gardened, and harvested by day comes to help the family after Rose Dear jumps into the well (101). True Belle is also a sewing woman or healer who provides the healing that Violet and her siblings need after their mother commits suicide. Finally, Joe's words capture the power of women to heal. He says, "It's a way they have of mending you, fixing what they think needs repair" (122).

A primary category of healers, motherhood, has a vaulted place in the hierarchy of women's power. Mother is a collective term and refers to the special powers of women whether elderly ancestral or deified. The Yoruba lineage has conserved the ancestral mother cult, one of the oldest and most persistent within the African spiritual universe. In her seventh novel, *Paradise*, Morrison situates the women of the convent as those who grow food and cultivate the land and provides the context for agricultural processes and sacred rites, since agriculture fosters the idea of the divine on a daily basis through the interaction of earth and the corporate power of the women. The Convent women tend to the fluids of life water, wine, fruit, and semen in the form of the fire hot purple peppers, which have the qualities needed to bear life through self-regeneration. The women's agricultural activities represent the symbolic landscape of power raising the ire of the men incensed about the nature of women who don't need men and prefigure the women's demise.

Morrison also uses the Yoruba idea of *Iya Kekere*, or "little mother" to subvert male dominance and helps establish female spiritual authority and autonomy. Consolata represents one of those African women who "know things." After her change from "Connie" she modifies the codes and creates an injunctive form of language consistent with her spiritual identity. As ritual leader as she employs *so dayi*, which the Dogon call the *language of knowing*. After finding her "twinned" self she tells the women who reside in the convent, "If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say" (*Paradise* 262). After she finishes speaking, the women examine different features of Consolata's face and remark about its newness. Preparing them to meet their respective spirit twin, Consolata, who had spent her whole life forgetting, vows to teach the women "what they are hungry for" (*Paradise* 262).

Morrison uses ritual as an approach for characters to make and remake their worlds as they re-enact cosmological conceptions. The pervasiveness of ritual among the actions performed by characters in Morrison's *Paradise* warrants an inquiry. African ideas of the divine and the significance in ritual determine the success or failure of characters. Moreover, ritual incorporation serves Morrison's narrative purposes and sheds light on the ways in which African people rely on corporate behavior to engender their healing. The nexus between "real" and "imaginative" is imperceptible through the metaphor of ritual. As an integral component of the various processes constituting society or culture "ritual is a means of "socio-cultural integration, appropriation, or transformation" (Bell 16).

Through the ritual of transformation Consolata reestablishes the concept of the matriarch and the female notion of divinity linking ritual power to act in response to the particular aims of the individual women. Drawing sacred ideograms representative of their spiritual personalities the women express their sacred selves in silhouettes characteristic of Kongo Pembas or Vodun Veves. Using white, the color associated with the ancestors and the color of kaolin (clay) or *mpemba* found at the bottom of rivers. Using this organic substance, which originates below the *kalunga* line in the realm of the ancestors, the women refashion *minkisi* to heal and help them realize their potential.

These iconographic representations help the women mediate the space between their scarred physical selves and their spiritual identity. Morrison notes, “They altered. They had to be reminded of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive were the alive [*sic*] ones below” (265). These living outlines juxtapose the silhouettes of *decay* to which the people of Ruby were always on guard. Inhabitants of Ruby perceived how other Black towns had been merged with white towns and “had shriveled into *tracery*: foundation *outlines* marked by the way grass grew there.” They protected themselves against “wallpaper turned *negative* behind missing windows, (*emphasis added*, 6). The spiritual “tracing” ritual empowers the women to *recreate* themselves and spiritually transcend. Reconnections with nature allow the women to shift identity through space and time in the physical world to the mental world or ideational space and ultimately to the pneumatic or spiritual world. Discussing these “mutually permeable” and interpenetrable ontological spaces, Nzegwu asserts that these spheres constantly shift and change and permit a person to access these spirit spaces in the same way as one does objects in the physical world (Nzegwu 172). This spiritual nurturance provided at the novel’s end by Consolata, the revised Reverend mother, allows the women --Mavis, Iya Ibeji or mother of twins, Grace called Gigi, Pallas called Divine, Seneca, and Connie/Consolata-- to find the spiritual in-between and discover their spiritual selves. Subsequently, the women recycle through a series of continuous births through the regenerative Creator, or Divine female.

In the novels examined in this essay, I have presented the ways in which women have interacted spiritually as, healers, guides, mothers and nature workers through the maintenance of ecological ethics, intrinsic to African spiritual traditions. Within the broader framework of African worldviews embedded within the physical landscapes they have reclaimed identity through their fundamental relationship to nature. Understanding that the land was not hostile, only their captors, the sacred cosmos of beliefs and their ritual participation served to consolidate identity and preserve established traditions. As Morrison’s literary imagination demonstrates, African women who have remembered what others have forgotten are like the baobab trees spreading their roots toward the sky and below the earth providing nurture and spiritual sustenance to the community.

Notes

¹ The color of the marigolds, yellow, corresponds to the Kongo delineation of *musoni*.

² The asafetida bag replicates the Kongo concept of *minkisi*, a visual implement that has power to heal, protect and deflect harm. See Wyatt MacGaffey *Religion and Society in Central Africa: the Ba Kongo of Lower Zaire*. (Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1986) also for a discussion of re-codifications of Kongo culture see Robert Farris Thompson *Flash of the Spirit; African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1984).

³ *Aiye* is the Yoruba word for earth. Fundamentally, the power of the earth is connected to the power of the *Ajé*, those older women who have the ability to comfortably wield spiritual power. See Teresa N. Washington. *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts: Manifestations of Ajé in Africana Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.

⁴ A Personal conversation with Dr. Fu-Kiau.

⁵ The horse is one of Sango's zoomorphic symbols.

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Morrison did all of this fearlessly, no matter the costs that came with forcing American culture to come to her and her people. She composed her novels, edited her books, and published her literary criticism knowing that she could write circles around her critics—and often did. No one has gone to bat for William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* since. Finding those places where things pop is the central task of her humanism, which she calls, in the titular essay of the new collection, the act of “self-regard.” Self-regard, Morrison insists, is the process in which we recover our selves—in which we once again become human. It means experiencing black culture “from a viewpoint that precedes its appropriation”; it means seeing humanity after the veil of otherness has fallen.