

**“THEY SEEM TO HAVE A BLESSEDNESS”:  
SPIRITUALITY AND THE FEMALE PRESENCE  
IN MORRISON’S *BELOVED* AND NAYLOR’S *MAMA DAY***

**THESIS**

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This thesis is dedicated to my own “foremothers,”  
who taught me the importance of spiritual life  
and the joy of good storytelling:

Sarah Jamie Berry Klein

Beverly Berry O’Daniel

Dorothy Howard Berry

J. Mildred Jones Howard

Juanita Berry Davis

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter(s)	Page
<b>Introduction</b>	
<b>In the Beginning: Spirituality and the African-American Woman</b>	
<b>Writer.....</b>	<b>1</b>
“Genius” and “Spirituality”: Distinct Traditions in Conceptualizing Women as Artists	
The Scholarship on <i>Beloved</i> , <i>Mama Day</i> , and Spirituality	
 <b>I. A Feminist Perspective: African-American Women and Spirituality.....</b>	 <b>11</b>
Spirituality and Contemporary Feminist Scholarship: Friends or Foes?	
Black Feminism: Seeking Relevance for Non-Anglo Women, Non-Anglo Texts	
“Feminist Spirituality”: A Working Definition	
 <b>II. Spiritual Re-Memory: Indigenous Traditions and Feminist Spirituality in <i>Beloved</i> and <i>Mama Day</i>.....</b>	 <b>24</b>
Women Preserving a Spiritual Past	
Indigenous Spirituality, African-American Spirituality	
The Accessible Divine: Spirituality as Immanent and Experiential Interrelationship, The Ancestors, and Ecological Consciousness	
 <b>III. Goddess Power: Archetypes of a Black Female Divine in <i>Beloved</i> and <i>Mama Day</i>.....</b>	 <b>62</b>
The Goddess Debate	
Faces of the African Goddess	
Re-Memory of Goddess Power in <i>Beloved</i>	
Re-Memory of Goddess Power in <i>Mama Day</i>	
 <b>IV. Spiritual Specialists: Women’s Leadership in <i>Beloved</i> and <i>Mama Day</i>.....</b>	 <b>88</b>
The Female Medium in <i>Beloved</i>	
Baby Suggs, Priestess	
The Female Shaman in <i>Mama Day</i>	
“You there, Sister?”: Women’s Leadership and the Implications for Community	

**Conclusion**

<b>“They Have a Language for It”: Morrison, Naylor, and the Spiritual Endeavor of Female Authorship.....</b>	<b>135</b>
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<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>143</b>
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## INTRODUCTION

### IN THE BEGINNING: SPIRITUALITY & THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN WRITER

The initial spark for this thesis project, and a major impetus guiding my work on this topic, came in a graduate seminar on African-American women writers in the fall of 1997. For the first time, I read Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, and was captivated by her assertions about spirituality, about African-American women and their art. Walker writes of her creative foremothers:

For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste, because *they were so rich in spirituality — which is the basis of Art* [emphasis added].  
(223)

Walker has, throughout her career as a writer and feminist activist, again and again drawn attention to the matter of spirituality, always returning to it in her examinations of the African-American woman's experience and art. In an early 1973 interview, she says, "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of my people. . . . Beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities,

the loyalties and the triumphs of Black women" (O'Brien 19).

Even outside the African-American tradition, Walker locates concern with spirituality in the female writer's realm: "The white women writers that I admire . . . are well aware of their own oppression and search incessantly for a kind of salvation. Generally, too, they are more tolerant of mystery than is Ahab, who wishes to dominate, rather than to be on equal terms" (O'Brien 193). She then goes beyond this gender focus to particularly attribute awareness of spirituality to the African-American community: "If there is one thing African-Americans have retained of their African heritage, it is probably Animism: a belief that makes it possible to view all creation as living, as being inhabited by Spirit. This belief encourages knowledge perceived intuitively . . . One thing I try to have in my life and in my fiction is an awareness and openness to mystery" (O'Brien 193).

Alice Walker has documented and given voice to a deep sense of inheritance and yearning in the history of African-American women. Her writing, both fiction and nonfiction, has sought to give a belated voice to Black women of America, the women who, as Walker describes it, have had spirituality "so intense, so deep, so unconscious, they were themselves unaware of the richness they held" ("In Search" 232).

### **"Genius" and "Spirituality": Distinct Traditions in Conceptualizing Women as Artists**

Walker's focus on spirituality as a particular inheritance or tradition of African-American women and as the foundation of art is remarkable. Its uniqueness is illuminated, for example, when it is held up next to Virginia Woolf's assertions about art and womanhood, which reflect a sensibility and a feminism securely grounded in the

contexts and restraints of Western, Anglo culture. While the African-American Walker links women and Art by speaking of "spirituality," the British Woolf links women and Art by speaking of "genius" (45). Virginia Woolf's 1929 text, *A Room of One's Own*, as scholar Mary Gordon notes in the introduction to the 1981 edition, is undoubtedly guided by certain assumptions of class, race, culture, and historical experience (viii). For Woolf, art comes from genius, and genius in Woolf's argument is inherently bound by economic and class status. For Woolf, the potential for genius may not be realized without economic support. The women Woolf seeks to elevate as artists are undoubtedly Anglo, and her envisioned means of liberation are equally culturally specific, and culturally limited, focusing on attaining higher education and access to money—the resources and tools that enable genius to be realized in art. Woolf's argument focuses largely on women's exclusion from a British Anglo class system where money, hereditary status, and, ultimately, gender, provided access to institutions of formalized higher learning and thus to one important outlet for nurturing and realizing the capacity for genius. Woolf's text bemoans women's lack of access to "archaeology, botany, anthropology, physics, the nature of the atom, mathematics, astronomy, relativity, geographic fellowships and lectureships, and prizes and scholarships" (21). Her call for women to unleash their potential "genius" and become artists is inherently linked to a system that validates a lifetime of pursuing art primarily for those with "a pleasant and honorable lifetime in the shelter of one of the liberally endowed professions" (21). This association of art with "genius" and its inherent tie to economic and class status, is, therefore, born of a particular cultural context.

Walker's very different focus, the emphasis on spirituality rather than "genius" as

an impetus for art, represents a stance appropriate to the real experience and context of African-American women, who shape their own values and understand their own struggles out of their experiences and unique histories. My suggestion does not seek to discredit the importance of Woolf's argument, or to suggest that her pioneering stance holds no value for African-American women and their quests as artists. However, the scholarly dialogue must recognize and assert the richness and unique quality of the African-American experience on its own terms, seeking to avoid the Western error of subsuming all experience and tradition under *Anglo-European* experience and tradition, recognizing the ways in which the African-American woman's understanding of art, and of spirituality, is singular and worthy of scholarly discussion. Exploration specifically of African-American women writers and their vision of spirituality and gender represents a relatively uncharted territory, and this approach attempts to specify the value of this tradition in its own right, as a means to its own ends.

So, just as Woolf searched for female models of "genius," attempting to understand herself as part of an evolving tradition of women writers, Alice Walker looks to her foremothers, understands her own creativity as coming from a spiritual center, and frames the African-American women's artistic legacy with spirituality at its very core. In doing so, Walker has been a major voice in an ongoing tradition of spiritually-interested and spiritually-aware writing by African-American women. Earlier roots of this tradition can be traced back, for example, to writer/folklorist/anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. Her interest in voodoo religion, as well as her affection for the stories by which the Black community explained the world and sustained itself, are now common knowledge among scholars of her work. Hurston's fiction writing has been said to be intensely spiritually

aware, grounded in the power of nature, human community, and sexuality. This spiritual aspect of her work has been the subject of considerable and ever-burgeoning critical attention (Holloway, McAninch-Runzi, Pryse, Wilson). The tradition can be traced forward from Hurston and Walker to other African-American women writers. Its orientation towards spirituality is echoed in the fiction of Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor, writers who seem to understand their art in such terms and to especially associate the female presence with spirituality, much in the footsteps of their foremothers.

### **The Scholarship on *Beloved*, *Mama Day*, and Spirituality**

Such awareness lies at the thematic center of both Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*, and Gloria Naylor's 1988 novel, *Mama Day*, the texts on which this study will focus. These two novels invite a discussion of spirituality and gender. Although parallels exist thematically between the two novels, surprisingly there has been no published scholarship to date examining these particular works together. Thus, an exploration of spirituality and the female presence in *Beloved* and *Mama Day* has not yet been undertaken and represents an important starting place, a crossing of common thread linking the two novels. Appropriations of spirituality and gender form a major bridge between the texts that is yet to be appreciated, and it is this part of the critical dialogue to which my study will contribute.

I don't wish to suggest that the scholarly discussion in general has excluded these novels, or that spirituality is an entirely new frontier in literary studies. On the contrary, Morrison's *Beloved* has, in general, stimulated a vast and ongoing body of scholarship, almost overwhelming in its breadth and volume. Naylor's *Mama Day* claims a smaller body of scholarship, although the novel has elicited some attention critically and has been

recognized as perhaps her finest work (Brown 15). However, serious discussions of spirituality in the novels, particularly related to gender, have been few. Several dissertation manuscripts (unpublished, to date) have been produced in the past few years focusing on spirituality in works by African-American women writers (Adams, Bryant, McAninch-Runzi), yet these have excluded studies on *Beloved* and *Mama Day*, and none have examined the issue of gender and spirituality in these novels with the specific approach my study will take.

The scholarship on spirituality in *Beloved* has focused almost exclusively on the influence of Christianity in the world of the novel and on Morrison as a writer, primarily exploring avenues such as Biblical revision and Christian symbolism in the texts (Broad, Cunningham, Guth, Mayer, Mitchell, Taylor-Guthrie). Where scholars have delved into spirituality in the world of *Mama Day*, the discussion has remained limited, with only a handful of related essays published (Meisenhelder, Puhr, Tucker). These few studies focus on elements of healing, magic and/or community in the novel, without directly naming or investigating "spirituality" as such.

Sheila Ruth notes the traditional tendency for academics and feminists to shy away from all things associated with "spirit," finding it an uncomfortable area for scholarship and questioning its suitability as subject matter (6). This avoidance suggests a bent toward the dismissal of spirituality as something outside the realm of true scholarship or true art. Such avoidance imposes a particular value system of scientific "rationality" on academic activity and ignores the true weight of spirituality and its potential importance to self, community, and art. As Ruth notes, spirituality functions to delineate selfhood, a world view, a way of making sense of life and defining meaning in



the midst of mysteries (11, 13, 18). It acts as a link between the individual and the group, embodying, as scholars across disciplines have recognized, great potential to unite communities in their sense of common experience, and to become intensely political in its power (Adams, Carson, Daly, Goldsmith, McAninch-Runzi, Richards, Walker). In this sense, the power of spirituality both to shape art and artists, and to undergird the thematic foundations of a work of fiction, proves tremendous and carries far-reaching implications. Particularly here, among African-American women writers taking part in a literary dialogue with art, history, self, and community, spirituality can carry the great significance Walker has ascribed.

Much of the (largely unspoken) dismissal of spirituality as inappropriate academic subject matter stems from a lack of careful and clear parameters within which to discuss it. Although the number of recent dissertations on the subject of African-American women writers and spirituality would seem to suggest that it has become a hot topic, definitions of spirituality prove elusive and problematic in literary scholarship overall. What exactly is it we are discussing here, and how can we apply its parameters to rigorous study of a text if we are unclear and evasive? This task of clarity and definition proves slippery for many scholars, across disciplines, who seek to place spirituality at the forefront of their inquiries. Often spirituality is defined only by the underlying assumptions evidently built in to the writer's argument. The scholarly dialogue also tends to equate "spirituality" with "religion," either explicitly or implicitly. Scholars' otherwise useful and interesting definitions of spirituality could, in many cases, be strengthened by avoiding such pitfalls—pitfalls which admittedly remain ever-present when the subject matter at hand is so loaded with personal, cultural, historical, and religious baggage.

In examining the scholarly dialogue on spirituality, women and literature, one must explore not only literary criticism, but also interdisciplinary scholarship and even some theological scholarship. Looking to literary criticism alone for a definition of spirituality proves disappointing and limiting. The literary criticism frequently tends to avoid defining what spirituality, or religion, for that matter, means. And, as Dalke has noted, literary criticism has had a reputation for not taking spirituality very seriously in general (2). In looking at work by feminist scholars for definitions, there are some distinct points of convergence in definitions of what constitutes spirituality as well as some interesting distinctions and emphases. Sheila Ruth defines spirituality as she defines "spirit," "the center of our sentient, conscious existence, the core and source of awareness, what propels and motivates us, what protects and maintains our integrity, the alpha of self" (21). Susan Cahill defines spirituality as a "belief in the reality of the invisible," and she characterizes the spiritual experience by (a.) a sense of a world beyond the single, separative self (something larger than ourselves), and (b.) mystery (xv-xvi). For Cahill's purposes, aspects of spiritual life often include one or more of the following: mystical or visionary experience, healing, prayer, a vision of social justice, the responsibilities of community, primacy of conscience, love of nature, and respect for a God-figure (xvii). Carol Christ's discussion of women writers assumes "spirituality" and "religion" to be virtually interchangeable terms, representing "those deeper experiences of self and world" (1). Christ defines stories with a sacred dimension as those that "point to a source of meaning that gives purpose to people's lives" (3). She points to Stephen Crites' recognition that almost every story has a sacred dimension, "Not so much because the gods are celebrated in them, but because sense of self and world is created through them .

. . . For these are stories that orient the life of a people through time . . . to the great powers that establish the realities of their world" (9-10). Scholar Anne Dalke's discussion conflates religion and spirituality explicitly, and suggests that spirituality allows human beings to cope with, understand, and transcend their circumstances (2-3). For the purposes of Maire Mullins' argument, spirituality is our understanding and naming of what is sacred. By recognizing and expressing (a.) what is divine and (b.) what our relationship is to the divine, we are spiritual beings, she suggests (1). Dona Richards, in her cultural study of African-American spirituality, equates the "spiritual" with the "emotional," suggesting that it is the unquantifiable, nonrational part of ourselves (249). Another link in the scholarly conversation exists between spirituality and community, with critics such as T.W. Lewis and Mary Ann Wilson citing this element as crucial, while also focusing on self-development and self-awareness.

Ann Adams, in her dissertation on African-American women's novels, defines spirituality as "a thread of 'being,' a presence felt within the moment that also establishes one's connection with others" (7). According to Adams' definition, spirituality is understood and expressed on a personal level, which separates it from organized religion. She sees spirit as more "inclusive and intimate" than religion, "one's essence, the motivation behind each individual action, or the connection between one's soul or psyche and what that individual perceives as the infinite power of the universe (13-14). Literary scholar Carolyn Mitchell, in her study of Biblical revision in *Beloved*, even more carefully delineates between spirituality and religion, defining religion as inherently structured on doctrine and dogma, maintained by ritual (28). Religious belief and practice, Mitchell argues, are subject to historical, social and cultural change, and are

tradition-bound. She associates religion with the worship of some type of God-figure. Spirituality, in Mitchell's definition, is the "unchanging foundation of religion" (28-29). Spirit, she suggests, is the individual manifestation of the sacred in everyday life and experience. It is the nonanthropomorphic God, and spirituality is godliness experienced by humans (29). It is more accessible than organized religion, ever-present. For Mitchell, religion is merely one way in which spirituality is expressed and experienced (29).

In Chapter One, I will outline the specific definition of gender-focused spirituality which I will apply throughout my discussion of *Beloved* and *Mama Day*. I find Mitchell's delineation between spirituality and religion useful, and I intend to ground my own study in her argument that "religious" behavior and ideology as such are one, but only one, expression of spirituality. Although some of the rituals and roles included in my discussion could be placed under the heading of "religion," I am interested in getting at the heart of spiritual meaning and spiritual power that may go beyond religious dogma or any exclusive, formalized religious system. The non-dogmatic yet richly spiritual and creative element embodied in these texts merits further exploration.

As Toni Morrison has said of spirituality, "it's not as though it's a thing you do on Sunday morning in church, it's not a tiny, entertaining aspect of one's life—it's what *informs* your sensibility" (Taylor-Guthrie "Conversations" 226). Without spirituality, Morrison says, "I think I would have been quite bereft, because I would have been dependent on so-called scientific data to explain hopelessly unscientific things and I would have relied on information that even subsequent objectivity has proved to be fraudulent" (226).

## CHAPTER I

### **A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE: AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN AND SPIRITUALITY**

Toni Morrison's commentary on women, spirituality and the African-American community, offered in interviews that span the past decade, have led me to look at her fiction, and the fiction of her contemporaries, more thoughtfully. Along with Alice Walker's writings on the subject, they have acted as a catalyst for this project by suggesting the importance of a gender-focused inquiry into spirituality in the novels. Spirituality seems to be linked to womanhood, and to African-American womanhood in particular, for Morrison as much as it has been for Walker. Morrison characterizes African-American women by their "intimate relationship with God and death and all sorts of things that strike fear into the modern heart," suggesting that "they have a language for it. They seem to have a blessedness maybe. But they seem not to be fearful" (Taylor-Guthrie "Conversations" 269). Interests in both the world of African-American women and the world of spirituality come up regularly in Morrison's discussions of her work:

I've just insisted upon being called a Black woman novelist. And I decided what that meant—in terms of this big world that has become broader and deeper through that process of reclamation, because I have claimed it. I have claimed what I know. As a Black and a woman,

I have access to a range of emotions and perceptions that are unavailable to people who are neither. (Taylor-Guthrie "Conversations" 243)

Of the knowledge she writes from, Morrison says, "My life seems to be dominated by information about Black women. They were the culture bearers" (Taylor-Guthrie "Conversations" 140). And of these women's spiritual beliefs, she says, "They were way stations in their thinking about how to get on with it and a reason to get up the next morning" (Taylor-Guthrie "Conversations" 115). In speaking of *Beloved*, Morrison says, "There is a moment somewhere in time in which that's what you have to know. That is, ghosts or spirits are real, and I don't mean just as a thought . . . It's that place you go to in *Beloved* right away, a shared human response to the world" (Taylor-Guthrie "Conversations" 242). Morrison has, in discussing her work, expanded further on her preoccupations with women and things that may be defined as "spiritual" in the writing of *Beloved*: "I wanted to understand that period of slavery and about women loving things that are important to them . . . Those people could not live without value. They had prices, but no value in the white world, so they made their own, and they decided what was valuable" (Taylor-Guthrie "Conversations" 235).

Interest in and connection to the concerns of women and experiences of spirituality are common threads between the lives and art of Morrison and Naylor. In 1985, just a few years before the nearly simultaneous publications of *Beloved* and *Mama Day*, the two writers held an interview/discussion together, which Naylor transcribed for publication in *The Southern Review*. In her prologue to this transcript, interestingly enough, Naylor cites attention to gender as a vital meeting place for the two authors. She

writes, "Through the day I have seen that there is so much that is different about us . . . But we are, after all, women" (569). Early in their conversation together, Naylor describes her sense of attachment to Morrison's novel, *Sula*, speaking of the text's appreciation of "female bonding," which, "while falling short of a physical bonding, involved a spiritual bonding that transcended the flesh and was much superior" (578). In other interviews, Naylor has discussed her own life, which included several years preaching as a Jehovah's Witness, a calling the author points to as a search for spiritual meaning that took on politically-charged power (Perry 221). She has, as a writer, steadfastly chosen the lives and stories of women as those she can best tell, and *must* tell (Perry 226). As for *Mama Day*, Naylor has pointed out that she sought to take the reader "to the last frontier . . . where there are indeed women who can work with nature and create things which have not been documented by institutions of science, but which still happen. The book's an exploration of magic. . . . Me, I'm a believer in these things" (Perry 233-34). Clearly, she, like Morrison, has been vocal about her interest in the lives of African-American women and their particular association with spiritual, or as Naylor has labeled it, "magical," realities.

### **Spirituality and Contemporary Feminist Scholarship: Friends or Foes?**

It is the connection between spirituality and the female presence in both *Beloved* and *Mama Day* that this study will specifically explore. The strong association of spirituality with, as Morrison puts it, "culture bearing," and with individual and community power, makes feminist theory appropriate here. In the tradition of bell hooks, feminism defined *politically* focuses on ending sexist oppression, just as in the tradition of Elaine Showalter, feminism defined *culturally* focuses on "self-conscious interest in

and celebration of the values, beliefs, ideas , and behavior uniquely, or traditionally characteristic of women” (Denard 171). Feminist scholarship, then, “addresses the reasons why or the ways in which power can and should be shared with women; or it celebrates the values, the beliefs—the culture—uniquely characteristic of women (Denard 171). Yet, even though feminist theory seems most appropriate for my discussion of spirituality and gender in the novels, it also presents difficulties, and the scholar who seeks to mix feminism with spirituality seems often to do so at her own peril.

The issue of spirituality remains surrounded by controversy and debate among scholars of feminist theory working across disciplines, including literary studies. Feminist writer and comparative literature scholar Carol Lee Flinders has pointed out the necessity for feminism to deal with issues of spirituality in general, attempting in her scholarship to debunk the myth that spirituality and feminism are incompatible (Creedon 49). Although she is aware of the misogynistic aspects of the major religions, Flinders finds spirituality in and of itself to be an important aspect of life that cannot be denied and should be integrated into feminist scholarship and activism, rather than being given the neglectful cold shoulder, arguing that feminism and spirituality are, for her personally and for many women, ”mutually necessary: for either to be fully realized, both would have to be accommodated” (Creedon 49). Flinders too recognizes the potential of spirituality to act cohesively and to be politically powerful: “Feminism will really catch fire when it re-establishes itself as a resistance movement based on spirituality” (Creedon 49). Anne Carson responds to the fears of many feminists who shy away from dialogue related to spirituality by noting that even organized religion serves incredibly important functions: “It is true that religion may in some contexts divert people from awareness of oppression,



yet religion also serves to describe social and cosmic relationships, one's history and one's place in the world—and what could be more important than redefining current patterns of power?" (4-5).

The reticence and debate about spirituality within feminism has to do with feminism's traditional focus on more material, here-in-this-world aspects of women's lives, seeing spirituality as something outside this framework and as a status quo distraction. In addition, spirituality has become a battleground among feminist scholars and activists who experience tension between the "work-from-within-the-system-for-change" vs. the "discard-the-system-and-start-all-new" ideologies, focusing on specific patriarchal religious traditions and dividing scholars along theological and political lines. Some scholars focus on revision, re-examination, and re-valuation of traditional religious models, while others want to discard all vestiges of patriarchal models and create entirely new systems of spiritual belief and practice for women, leaving scholarship on traditional religious systems behind once and for all. Sheila Ruth, for example, may fall into the second category, suggesting that "Finding ourselves increasingly free of the bleakness of patriarchal thinking, including its religion, which is its ultimate expression, we are finding ourselves regenerated. . . . The women's movement has matured beyond its beginning. We have discarded. Now we are in a position to create" (5,4). Scholars such as Mary Daly (who has sought areas other than biblical Christianity in which to place women's spirituality and has done extensive research on witchcraft), also align themselves with this stance. Along with Audre Lorde, these feminists argue that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (99). As McAninch-Runzi's scholarship has documented, other feminist scholars, feminist theologians among them,

“seek out to salvage the positive elements of scriptures” and embody the religious approach with women’s perspectives that have remained unnoticed historically or been misinterpreted with a misogynistic bent, approaching the Judeo-Christian tradition with the goals of “re-vision rather than rejection, re-construction rather than destruction, recovery rather than degeneration, re-definition rather than indefinability, re-valuation rather than devaluation” (156). These feminists suggest that they too are seeking a religious empowerment gained by rejecting male religious authority and by rejecting a patriarchal deity and searching for divinity within themselves (McAninch-Runzi 164). Both groups pursue the same ends by advocating a spirituality that truly reflects the experiences and needs of women and empowers them. The two sides merely advocate different paths for getting there. Although this dialogue should be viewed as a necessary and healthy one, the debate tends to polarize feminist scholarship and activism and has made feminist scholarship on spirituality, in any academic field, a minefield of politics.

### **Black Feminism: Seeking Relevance for Non-Anglo Women, Non-Anglo Texts**

Another consideration in applying feminist theory to a study of spirituality in these texts is the now familiar presence of Black feminism as a distinct entity. As McAninch-Runzi has argued, although the 1960’s wave of American feminism allowed Black women to “give voice to self-awareness and self-realization, and begin to search for experiential ancestors and spiritual foremothers,” it was also “criticized at times by Afro-American women as being a white, middle-class movement with vastly different concerns and experiences” (8). Black feminism’s awareness of the traditional class and race bias of the American feminist tradition has led, thankfully, to a more relevant and rigorous theory, one which is closer to being truly whole and which is appropriate for

scholarship on African-American literature. Denard points out that, much like feminism, ethnicity, defined as the concern with ancestral group membership, can be understood politically and culturally.

Its political connotation is derived from the desire on the part of minority ethnic groups in a multi-ethnic society to end social oppression by the dominant ethnic group. Its cultural corollary is a self-conscious interest in and celebration of the separate values, beliefs, ideas and behavior of all ethnic groups in society . .

Scholarship and artistic production concerned with ethnicity argues social and political equality and cultural pluralism, or it celebrates the separate values, beliefs, and behaviors of a particular ethnic group. (171)

Denard, in her study “The Convergence of Feminism and Ethnicity in the Fiction of Toni Morrison,” goes on to provide a useful elaboration on the special characteristics of Black feminism:

Among Black women, who have historically suffered oppression because of both race and gender, there is usually a simultaneous concern for both these issues. They abhor both sexist and racist oppression. But because of their minority ethnic status, which keeps their allegiance to ancestral group foremost, most shun an advocacy of the kind of political, existential feminism embraced by many women of the majority culture. For Black women, their concern with feminism is usually more group-centered than self-

centered, more cultural than political. As a result, they tend to be concerned more with the particular female cultural values of their own ethnic group rather than with those of women in general. They advocate what may be called ethnic cultural feminism. And in so doing, they are able to address the rights and values of women without separating themselves from an allegiance to their ethnic group. (172)

As Jacqueline Trace notes in her study of Black feminism in *Beloved*, the realities of African-American women that have made their concerns and their understanding of feminism distinct from Anglo women's include greater suffering and loss of power at all levels created by slavery and lingering long after its demise (15). Trace adds, "The pain endured by Black women in Ante- and postbellum America is one reality that differentiates them from white women; another is the strong bonding among Black women that has facilitated the oral transfer of myths from one generation to the next" (16). Bell hooks, scholar of Black feminism, agrees that African-American women have historically maintained a much stronger support network and sense of community (11). As Trace defines it, "Black feminism, originating from the institutions of slavery and Reconstruction, reflects beliefs, values, and behavior indigenous to Black women" (16). Black feminist theology, then,

In contrast to Western traditions of Judaism and Christianity . . .  
rejects patriarchal monotheism and the dichotomization of reality.  
Mutually exclusive categories, such as good and evil, life and  
death, soul and body, God and nature, master and servant,

reminiscent of Christianity, do not exist in Black feminist theology,  
which internalizes rather than objectifies deity. (16)

Essentially, Black feminism and Black feminist theology seek, as Carol Christ has called for, a focus on “the relevance and validation of women’s experience” (“The Essential” 20). This goal has been articulated by feminists on both sides of the debate over spirituality, with the means and tools of achieving it still up for argument. Black feminism and Black feminist theology address this need for individual relevance within feminist theory, allowing for a more complete and thoughtful route to empowerment for women. Elisabeth Fiorenza puts it best when she discusses feminist inquiries into spirituality:

There is not one feminist theology or *the* feminist theology, but many different articulations. . . . Unlike their male counterparts, feminists reject the patriarchal endeavor to create a religious monolith—*the* ultimate theology . . . instead, they embrace the individual’s particulars and insist with Carol Christ that the vision of the theologian is affected by the particulars of his or her experience. . . . Thus, both the theologian as well as the theology, are grounded in the reality of the community and, subsequently, in a healing vision of co-humanity. (162)

As McAninch-Runzi points out, feminism seeks to value and recognize spirituality as a force of healing and power for women, in opposition to traditional hierarchical tendencies of Western religion in particular and paradigms of male authority in general (162). Black feminist theory seeks to re-endow African-American women with a sense of this healing

and power. Alice Walker's stance sets the tone of the Black feminist movement, defining the "Womanist" as a Black feminist or feminist of color, who is "courageous or willful . . . responsible, in charge, serious" ("In Search" xi). Walker suggests that "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender," and that the Womanist "*loves the spirit*" (xii).

### **"Feminist Spirituality": A Working Definition**

Anne Carson's definition of "feminist spirituality," although not explicitly an outgrowth of Black feminism, represents a solid and comprehensive framework that encompasses fundamental tenets of feminist theory and is broad enough to foster attention to the goals of Black feminism in particular. Carson's definition examines female spiritual empowerment with a definition that is unconstrained culturally, which makes it a valid choice for my particular discussion. Carson's definition encompasses a breadth that avoids a pre-determined stance in the ongoing, "either or" feminist arguments, allowing those who use it plenty of room in which to both examine traditional religious systems, or to embrace goddess traditions, syncretic spiritual beliefs, or possibly any other number of spiritual experiences. Her approach to feminist spirituality allows for a wide range of belief and practice, although it does specify some basic parameters of gender focus. In "genderizing" her definition of spirituality, Carson highlights its potentials to be political, and thus very much of-this-world, applicable in a real way to women's lives and avoiding feminism's traditional fears. Her approach to examining a gender-focused spirituality does not inherently assume an Anglo bias or any particular religious or cultural system at its core, allowing for an approach to examining spirituality that can truly focus on, to use Trace's words, the "beliefs, values and behavior indigenous to Black women" (16). It is this call for relevance in gender-centered approaches that has

guided Black feminism since its inception. Carson's delineation of feminist spirituality represents an important step toward the realization of these goals, incorporating the interests of women outside the Anglo tradition into feminist ideology through the cultural and ideological flexibility of her definition.

Carson's definition of feminist spirituality incorporates many of the assumptions underlying other scholars' understandings of spirituality (Adams, Cahill, Christ, Dalke, Lewis, Mitchell, Mullins, Ruth, Wilson). Like Sheila Ruth, Carson's definition assumes that spirituality lies at the center of human experience and is connected to our awareness, motivation, and conscious relationship to the world around us. Like Susan Cahill's, Carson's definition identifies an awareness to the world beyond ourselves as individuals as the embodiment of spirituality, and like Cahill, Carson's feminist spirituality recognizes a sense of mystery associated with spiritual experience—linked, for Carson, to creative experience. Carol Christ's definition of spirituality points to its providing a source of meaning for people's lives, and Carson's definition of feminist spirituality clearly assumes this fundamental aspect. Anne Dalke's definition of spirituality has cited its potential to allow people to transcend their circumstances, and this potential is clearly recognized with a gender-focused approach in Carson's definition. Just as Maire Mullins' argument has focused on spirituality as our recognition and expression of what is sacred and our relationship to the sacred, Carson's definition of feminist spirituality assumes this as a function and addresses it with gender-focus. Ann Adams, T.W. Lewis, Mary Ann Wilson have cited the linkage between spirituality and community, which Carson's feminist spirituality also assumes in a gender-focused manner (i.e. her definition is concerned about communities of women for one, and women's roles as leaders and

participants in communities for another). Anne Carson's explication of feminist spirituality also leaves ample room for an understanding of spirituality that is not inherently conflated with the dogma of organized religion, as Adams and Mitchell have advocated. The added attraction of utilizing Carson's theory of feminist spirituality, as previously mentioned, is that it remains open to a range of cultural and ideological manifestations, allowing it to remain relevant to the concerns of Black feminism.

Carson defines feminist spirituality as: 1.) A system of spiritual understanding and experience that insists on the power, value, and dignity, in some cases even the superiority, of women; 2.) Sometimes exclusively female-oriented (Dianic), sometimes more inclusive; 3.) The deity is in some way understood as female, whether seen as goddess archetype or other single entity, or as polytheistic image of goddess archetypes, or merely as a symbolic presence in some way); 4.) A belief that women's biological rhythms and/or creative forces mirror nature/earth; 5.) Belief that the Divine is immanent within us, here in this world; 6.) Belief that the Divine can be called upon for spiritual and creative uses; and 7.) Belief that spiritual and physical well-being are connected to keeping harmony with nature(5-6).

Anne Carson's scholarship on spirituality and feminism suggests that since the early 1970's women have been aware of their gendered existence, their womanhood, in a manner not traditionally encouraged or even possible in organized Western religion (1). She suggests that feminist activism and theory has led to an important renaissance, wherein "we are sharing stories of a women's culture . . . creating artwork that reweaves the threads of feminine experience," the very undertaking of Morrison and Naylor in writing *Beloved* and *Mama Day*, with a particular attention to African-American culture.



Carson's study is interested in the political, cultural, and social ramifications of women's spirituality, and it is equally attentive to women's experiences of spirituality in non-Western and ancient societies. Her arguments suggest that women's spirituality is often grounded in the experience of "self," including the physical self (3).

Carson's specific definition of feminist spirituality is played out in various ways in *Beloved* and *Mama Day*. This understanding of spirituality creates the thematic order of these fictional worlds, their women, their larger communities. In these novels, Morrison and Naylor have embraced a spiritual value system that provides healing, meaning and power for African-American women and their communities. These texts embody the basic tenets of Carson's feminist spirituality with *particular* attention to the realities, histories, and concerns specific to African-American women.

## CHAPTER II

### **SPIRITUAL RE-MEMORY: INDIGENOUS TRADITIONS AND FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY IN *BELOVED* AND *MAMA DAY***

The scholarship on spirituality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* has given overwhelming attention to the presence and influence of Christianity in the novel, focusing heavily, for example, on Christian symbols, archetypes, and themes, or on Biblical revision in the text. This trend in the scholarship is no accident. This vein of criticism seems to some degree a natural outgrowth of Morrison's work, as the worlds of her novels frequently include the presence, both literal and symbolic, of Christianity and the Black church. In interviews, Morrison has discussed Christianity's relationship to the Black community in America, citing its power and potential to strengthen and to provide refuge and a sense of transcendence for oppressed individuals, as well as its historical role as an artistic, political, and social, as well as theological, center of the African-American community (Taylor-Guthrie 116). However, rather than merely lauding the church, she has recognized African-Americans' complex relationship with Christianity, pointing to both the blessings and the curses of the church's presence in Black culture and recognizing that "some aspects of Christianity are very exclusive, rather than inclusive" (114, 116-117). This topic remains heated, as African-American writers and scholars from Richard Wright to Alice Walker have pointed to the damaging and oppressive

aspects of Christianity in the Black community, seeking to reclaim a more politically potent and/or Afrocentric spirituality for their communities.<sup>1</sup>

Toni Morrison has recognized the Black church and the Bible as major influences in her own life, recalling that her family “talked a great deal about Jesus,” while clarifying that “they selected out of Christianity all the things they felt applicable to their situation—but they also kept this other body of knowledge that we call ‘superstitions’” (Taylor-Guthrie 115). Here, Morrison has pointed to the *syncretic* nature of African-American religion, the unique dialogue, tension and blending of indigenous African beliefs that slaves brought with them to the United States with the Christianity taught to slaves by their masters upon arrival in America.<sup>2</sup> She views syncretism as somehow natural to the African-American cultural heritage: “Even now,” Morrison has said, “Africans have a way of saying that they feel that other people’s religions are an enhancement, something they could incorporate” (Taylor-Guthrie 116). The critical approach to examining spirituality in *Beloved* that focuses on examinations of Christianity has yielded numerous important studies and has fostered a significant vein of dialogue about the novel.<sup>3</sup> However, to continue to expand and enrich the dialogue on spirituality in the novel, it is important to recognize and explore the multiple elements contributing to the richly syncretic nature of African-American spirituality. The syncretic tradition *inherently*, by its very nature, includes more than just the Christian tradition. It encompasses a polyphony of cultures and traditions. So, to expand the critical conversation on African-American spirituality in these novels, we must give more attention to examining indigenous African traditions of spirituality and the forms in which they survive. As African-American scholar Dona Richards has suggested, “Africa

survives in [our] spiritual makeup in that it is the strength and depth of African spirituality and humanism which allowed for the survival of African-Americans as a distinctive cultural entity. It is this spirituality and vitality which defines [our] response to Western culture, and that response is universally African” (208). Richards argues that the Ethos (“shared group response”) and world-view of African-Americans are both uniquely *shaped by* African culture, and *participate in shaping* culture—the uniquely syncretic African-American spiritual culture (208). Much of the previous scholarship on spirituality in *Beloved* has acknowledged indigenous African traditions and elements only in passing, or primarily in an Anglocentric framework—one that considers African traditions in terms of the specific ways in which they collide with Christianity, wherein Christianity itself ultimately remains the primary critical focus.<sup>4</sup> In this study, I seek to explore the ways in which Morrison and Naylor value and appropriate an African spiritual past, one which “traveled” with slaves to a new land and has endured at some level, participating in the unique syncretic tradition of African-American spirituality. I seek to examine those elements of African spirituality that have in some sense survived and been embedded and re-valued in the texts of Morrison and Naylor, with a specific focus on the female presence. As Carolyn Denard has suggested, African-American feminism tends to take the form of what she terms “ethnic cultural feminism,” combining attention to gendered power with attention to ethnicity—concern for one’s ancestral group and celebration of its “separate values, beliefs, and behaviors” (171). Denard’s argument and Carson’s openness to this “ethnic cultural” approach in her definition of feminist spirituality shape my critical mission to focus on the unique ancestral origins of African-American women’s spiritual values, and the ways in which Morrison and Naylor enrich their fiction with

these values.

In both *Beloved* and *Mama Day*, the Black church and the influences of Christianity wield an undeniable presence and power. In *Beloved*, for example, Cincinnati's Church of the Holy Redeemer, a significant feature of the social and spiritual landscape, apparently claims a significant number of African-American followers. Characters such as Stamp Paid, Ella, and the churchwomen pride themselves on the ideals and safeties of community that stem from "act[ing] like a Christian" (186). The church shelters Paul D as he begins to struggle with his own memories and with the truths of Sethe's tortured past (218-235). In *Mama Day*, the church acts as a communal center, the site of funerals and at least one marriage. We know that some of the community's churchgoers, such as Ambush Duvall, are devout (70). Abigail, in contrast with Mama Day, relies heavily on her Christian faith and on Biblical teachings for strength and reassurance, particularly in times of crisis (228-229, 249-250). Yet, in the fictional worlds of *Beloved* and *Mama Day*, Christian ideology is ultimately seen as limited, and limiting, when it is lived in isolation from African traditions of spiritual belief and practice. In *Beloved*, for example, we know that the women who come in community to liberate Sethe from the ancestor-ghost bring "Christian faith—as shield and sword," but that they also bring "what they could and what they believed would work . . . Most bought a little of both" (257). The church, even as it provides him shelter, represents a cold and lonesome place to Paul D, and he finds little sustenance there until he is joined by Stamp Paid, producing a community that in itself seems to provide healing (218). In *Mama Day*, the church is associated with the self-righteous and hypocritical Pearl Duvall (92-93). A major Christian holiday is replaced with a local, communal celebration at

Candle Walk (110). Abigail is perceived by other characters as somehow not as strong, not as complete as she might be, depending frequently on her sister Mama Day, who welcomes and embodies the ancient, the old, pre-Christian ways (89). The ancestral, African elements of African-American spirituality are embraced in both *Beloved* and *Mama Day*, to such a degree that characters who live without a recognition and valuation of their indigenous spiritual inheritance are weakened, isolated, and spiritually bereft as a result. Both Morrison and Naylor, in these novels, seek a culturally relevant expansion of spiritual vision, recognizing the need for a spirituality that is less oppressive and more empowering, that meshes with personal and historical/cultural experience. Both authors recognize this potential in the syncretic tradition which allows them to creatively reclaim and re-value African ways, even as they recognize the presence and powers of the Christian church in African-American life.

### **Women Preserving a Spiritual Past**

Toni Morrison claims to “feel a strong connection to the ancestors,” and has said that she remained conscious of African religion and philosophy in writing *Beloved* (Taylor-Guthrie 140, 249). She recognizes the ways African traditions of spirituality have retained potency in the African-American community, proposing that “if they had been untampered with, [we] could have made out with the vestiges of that African religion . . . because it survived in some form” (116). Morrison’s investment in an African past centers on “the concept of an ancestor not necessarily as a parent, but as an abiding, interested, benevolent, guiding presence that is yours and is concerned about you, not quite like saints but having the same sort of access” (227). As a writer, she remains interested in telling those old stories, valuing the ancient traditions in narrative form and

insisting that preserving them is an important contribution to the future of African-American culture. In discussing African-American culture's inheritance of African mythology, she has said:

The community had to take on the responsibility of passing from one generation to another the mythologies, the given qualities, stories, assumptions which an ethnic group that is culturally coherent and has not joined the larger mainstream keeps very much intact for survival. The consequences of the political thrust to share in the economy and power of the country were to disperse that . . . But what that means is, something else has to take its place. And that something else I think I can best do in novels. The mythology in the books can provide what the other culture did. It provides a transition, a way to see what in fact the dangers are, what are the havens, and what is the shelter. That is true for everybody, but for people who have been culturally parochial for a long time, the novel is the transition. *The novel has to provide the richness of the past as well as suggestions of what the use of it is. I try to create a world in which it is comfortable to do both, to listen to the ancestry and to mark out what we might be doing sixty or one hundred years from now* [emphasis added]. (Taylor-Guthrie 113)

Gloria Naylor also has spoken of the need to retain the culture and mythology of an African past, speaking of the high cost for African-Americans that comes from “ . . . the stripping away of your soul when you move toward some sort of assimilation, . . . [which]

happens to any hyphenated American when you lose that which makes you uniquely you” (Perry 229).

Ann Adams suggests that African-American women were historically in a position to act as the culture-bearers of an African spiritual past. She suggests that because the Afrocentric worldview centers on values that embrace spiritual life and the family, “two areas that have always been more accessible parts of American culture for women,” Black women had less conflict than Black men did in maintaining Afrocentric spirituality while adapting to American life (27). Adams goes on to suggest that “also because women had no power, or at least an inferior status, there was little to be gained through incorporating white values,” while “African-American males had a more confusing place in society because they were male (a privileged position through which material success affected self-esteem), yet Black (an inferior position with little possibility of true improvement because external reference of color negates most attempts toward advancement)” (27). Adams suggests that African-American males faced a unique pressure and conflict in accepting Anglo-American values, and that they were uniquely positioned to submit “to Western ordering principles that equate manhood with forming an individual identity based primarily on individual efforts for external gains” (28). What Adams argues, then, is that African-American women have been historically and culturally positioned to act as stewards of Afrocentric values, including spirituality. She argues that “this difference in the prioritizing of values is also evident in literature” and that African-American women “perceive spirituality as an important force in their lives, which is why they are more willing to incorporate it in their texts” (28).

There may be another reason for this willingness to incorporate Afrocentric



spirituality into Black women's fiction. A recognition of and an openness to the female presence, a perspective that is possible in the beliefs of the indigenous traditions, contributes to the syncretic richness of African-American spirituality and is embraced by Morrison and Naylor. As Adams has noted, indigenous African spirituality tends (more so than the Western tradition) to incorporate the powers of both genders and to manifest itself pervasively across gender constructs, and lends itself less to patriarchal, hierarchical ideology than to "spirit manifesting itself in all things as a way of life" (26). And, as both Adams and Linda Myers have recognized, African culture began with the worship of female deities (Adams 26). This female presence, as many feminist scholars argue, has been traditionally and markedly silenced, devalued, or minimized in Christianity.<sup>5</sup> In valuing the pre-Christian, indigenous beliefs of the African-American community, Morrison and Naylor have endowed their female characters with a more rich, personally relevant and powerful spirituality than might have been embodied through Christianity in isolation. It is the African tradition, the blueprint of original beliefs and practices which Morrison has spoken of, that *Beloved* and *Mama Day* embrace and that gives power and recognition to the spiritual presence of the female. These authors and novels remember and re-tell an empowering legacy which authorizes female presence and widens spirituality beyond the worldview of Western, patriarchal models. In making visible the fullness of African-American spirituality by valuing its African elements, these authors have appropriated greater power for African-American women, have reminded them of a spiritual inheritance, a historical and cultural legacy, in which their experiences are better seen and heard – a legacy that, when fully remembered, offers a space for healing in the face of historical spiritual devaluation in American culture. It is in the re-memory of

African spirituality that African-American women achieve a spiritual power that validates their experience and their gender. Through this textual re-valuation of the indigenous traditions, a philosophy of feminist spirituality in line with Carson's definition marks both *Beloved* and *Mama Day*.

As Adams has argued,

When people believe that power belongs only to those the dominant culture has named as valuable, they accept that culture's right to define the values for all those living in it. Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor, perhaps more than other contemporary Black women writers, focus on the devastating effects of such exclusive ordering, and the frustration that people feel when they perceive no personal power to do their own ordering. Their characters are primarily black women . . . whose perception of reality the rest of society does not acknowledge. Because society tells these characters in many different ways that what they value is not of value . . . they begin to doubt their perception of reality and even themselves. (249)

I agree with Adams on these points, but depart from her argument when she suggests that these women are inevitably led to madness, death, or isolation from their communities (249). I take issue with her suggestion that "Morrison's and Naylor's novels paint a particularly negative picture because they offer little hope for the possibility of positive spiritual and physical integration into a society fraught with racial assumptions and stereotypes that distort honest interaction on many different levels" (249). At least in

the cases of *Beloved* and *Mama Day*, the authors have offered us an overriding philosophy of spiritual hope and the possibility for rejuvenation – and this is embodied in female characters who act as preservers, internalizing the spiritual values of an ancestral past in meaningful ways and passing these values on to future generations of both women and men.

### **Indigenous Spirituality, African-American Spirituality**

As scholar of religion and anthropology Mary Pat Fisher has defined it, indigenous spirituality is maintained by pockets of people around the world who still value "local sacred ways handed down from their remote ancestors and adapted to contemporary circumstances" (38). I suggest that African-Americans, because of the unique syncretic nature of their spiritual inheritance, represent one of these pockets of peoples around the world for whom ancestral ways still survive, as Morrison has suggested, "in some form," and have been adapted to "contemporary circumstances" – meaning, in this case, that they have intersected with American Christianity and American culture. Fisher argues:

These enduring ways, which indigenous people may refer to as their original instructions on how to live, were almost lost under the onslaught of genocidal colonization, conversion pressures from global religions, mechanistic materialism and destruction. Much of the ancient visionary wisdom has disappeared . . . Nevertheless, in our time there is a renewed interest in these traditions, fanning hope that what they offer will not be lost. (38)

This desire for re-memory of the indigenous spirituality is embodied in these novels. As

the communal narrator of *Mama Day* names it, the desire is for “Home . . . You can move away from it, but you never leave it. Not as long as it holds something to be missed” (50). In *Beloved*, Sethe’s slave mother spoke, and taught her, “words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now,” words she had “forgotten, along with the language she told it in . . . the same language her ma’m spoke, and which would never come back” (62). “But the message—that was and had been there all along,” as Sethe intuitively. She will reclaim this “message” in her spiritual journey from the novel’s beginning to end (62). Sethe, as the child of a Black father whom her Black mother “put her arms around,” carries these old truths forward in female form (62).

Fisher speaks of indigenous African spirituality and “sacred ways” rather than of indigenous African *religion* per se, because she recognizes the many geographical and group variances of practice and belief, as well as the relative absence of bureaucracy, hierarchy and canonization in these traditions. However, Fisher does find several elements common to indigenous spirituality as experienced almost pervasively throughout African traditions and in pockets of peoples in other parts of the world. These values, beliefs and practices, and the textual re-memories of them frame my argument—especially where they embrace the female presence.

### **The Accessible Divine: Spirituality as Immanent and Experiential**

At the most fundamental level, Fisher defines indigenous spirituality as “a lifeway, a particular approach to all life . . . not a separate experience like meditating in the morning or going to church on Sunday . . . but ideally pervasive [in] all moments” (40). Anne Carson’s definition of feminist spirituality includes this fluidity as one of its fundamentals as well, suggesting that feminist spirituality encompasses a belief the

Divine is immanent within us and encountered here in this world (5-6).

In *Beloved*, Sethe's memories allude to an indigenous African tradition, one associated with the pervasiveness and accessibility of spiritual experience and with the presence of the female. When pregnant with Denver, Sethe imagines the child in her womb to be an antelope, connoting Africa, "and why she thought of an antelope Sethe could not imagine since she had never seen one" (30). She guesses that the image of the antelope "must have been an invention held on to from before Sweet Home, when she was very young," but she cannot exactly place the early memory of song and dance that remains with her (30). For Sethe, the antelope connotes this partially veiled memory of song and dance, which represents for her a vision of spiritual experience and release in the moment, both individually and communally accessible, immediate, and transcending gender divisions: "Oh but when they sang. And 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. Some unchained, demanding other whose feet knew her pulse better than she did" [emphasis added] (31).

Sethe's experience of prayer is, we know, an individually accessible "lifeway." When Denver asks her mother what she has been praying for, Sethe responds, "Not *for* anything. I don't pray anymore. I just talk" (35). We are told that her "words whispered in the keeping room had kept her going" (86). The spirituality of Baby Suggs has also been an accessible, ever-present personal experience, not contingent upon sanctioned settings or rituals, and certainly not contingent on the local Christian church. We know that when Baby Suggs first arrives at her new home as a free woman, she says she has not been in a church in ten years, but "did get to church every Sunday some kind of way" (146). She

says that she “won’t need” Reverend Pike to become reacquainted with God, because she can “make [her] own acquaintance” (146). As my forthcoming discussion will further document, these represent but a few examples in the texts representing the imminence of the Divine and the pervasiveness of spiritual experience. In line with feminist spirituality and the indigenous traditions, these novels recognize that spiritual life is ever-present, here in this world, and that, as Sethe learns, “you your [own] best thing” (273).

The idea that spiritual beliefs and practices may be transmitted orally and experientially represents another closely-related fundamental of Fisher’s definition of indigenous spirituality:

Teachings are experienced rather than read from books. There are therefore no scriptures of the sort that other religions are built around. This characteristic helps to keep the indigenous sacred ways dynamic and flexible rather than fossilized. It also keeps the sacred experience fresh in the present (40).

Again, an immediate, personal and accessible quality pervades the indigenous tradition. Feminist spirituality itself embraces this personal, experiential approach. Carson’s definition specifies that the Divine can be called upon and communicated in a direct and individual way (5-6).

We know that Baby Suggs prefers to refer to her leadership in the Clearing as her “Call.” We are told that she insists she is too “ignorant” for delivering “sermons,” but that “she *called* and the hearing heard” (177). Spiritual leadership here possesses a verbal, spoken quality, and spiritual experience is framed as something that, rather than being codified or written, can be spoken and “heard.” After Baby Suggs’ death, Sethe can return

to the Clearing, although it has been changed by the influx of “big-city revivals,” to call up the Divine for healing and comfort, on her own time and in her own forms, both spoken and intuitive (95).

In *Mama Day*, we know that Willow Springs’ story, and that of the Day family, is founded on the oral mythology of a powerful woman, Sapphira Wade, as opposed to the written history that George searches for in the ledgers of a slave owner (218). Like the young scholar who returns to Willow Springs only to try to constrain and rationalize its culture, George, still keeping himself outside the spiritual possibilities of Willow Springs, insists on trying to place myth and mystery, and thus spirituality, into a rational, and textual, framework. He says, “The whole thing was so intriguing. I wondered if that woman had lived at all. Places like this island were ripe for myths, but if she had really existed, there must be some record” (218). As a preface to the beginning of the text, the reader of this novel encounters a bill of sale for Sapphira to Mr. Bascombe Wade of Willow Springs. Yet we come to learn that the text of this bill of sale, taken alone, can never tell the whole story, cannot alone convey the spirit or power of Sapphira. The spiritual truths of the novel lie in the spoken quality of the text, the lived experience and spiritual community of the characters and their ancestors, including the great mysterious spiritual matriarch, Sapphira. The spiritual truths of African-born foremother Sapphira Wade are apparently so experiential, so intuitively present and un-codified, that the communal narrator says, “Sapphira Wade don’t live in the part of our memory we can use to form words” (4).

The novel itself, in its form and structure, takes on a richly oral quality, mingling the voices of George, Cocoa and a communal narrator, indicating at every turn that this

story is in process—it has been told and will continue to be told in the coming generations, represented by the new spiritual keeper, Cocoa. We know that the ancestors buried in the Day family cemetery “speak,” as well. From this natural spot, known as the “other place,” the dead ancestors share their stories, their spiritual wisdoms (151). In addition, Mama Day’s powerful spirituality is spoken, not written or codified, as are the Biblical texts from which Abigail reads during the storm (249).

This indigenous quality of experiential spontaneity is again embodied in Little Caesar’s funeral scene, the “standing forth” held in the church but not quite suited to it, requiring a spiritual coming-together of the mourners that allows for less formality and dogma. The mourners, dressed not “in special clothes” but in their everyday attire, address the dead child individually and orally, spontaneously expressing their grief (268). The mourners “addressing the coffin, and sometimes acting as if they expected an answer back,” experience this spiritual ritual in a uniquely non-Western manner (268). George, the outsider, observes:

Why did I get the feeling that this meeting wasn’t meant to take place inside of any building? The church, the presence of the minister, were concessions, and obviously the only ones they were going to make to a Christian ritual that should have called for a sermon, music, tears—the belief in an earthly finality for the child’s life. (269)

We are also told that George’s spiritual journey, for which his journey to Willow Springs and subsequent encounter with the Day women serves as a metaphor, is inherently personal, spontaneous and experiential. From the grave, George’s narrative voice tells Ophelia:



You had not prepared me for paradise. And to be fair, I realized that there was nothing you could have said that would have made any sense to me. I had to be there and see—no, feel—that I was entering another world. . . . And if someone had asked me about the fragrance, . . . I would have said that it smelled like forever.

(175)

### **Interrelationship, The Ancestors, and Ecological Consciousness**

Another fundamental commonality among indigenous spiritualities, argues Fisher, is the intimate interrelationship of all things on earth and in the cosmos, and thus the philosophy that "time is circular rather than linear, for it keeps coming back to the same place. . . . Life revolves around the generational cycles of birth, youth, maturity, and physical death, the return of the seasons, the cyclical movements of the moon, sun, stars and planets" (43). Thus the indigenous tradition emphasizes maintaining natural balances and relationship to a world that includes "spirits, the land and weather, people and creatures, and the power within" (44). It recognizes the complexity of "truth," a difficulty that Mama Day pinpoints in Western mainstream culture: "Everybody wants to be right in a world where there ain't no right or wrong to be found. My side. He don't listen to my side. She don't listen to my side. . . . Everything got four sides: his side, her side, an outside, and an inside. All of it is the truth. . . . When getting at the truth starts to hurt, it's easier to turn away" (230).

In African indigenous belief, the physical self is intimately connected to the spiritual experience (as opposed to the traditional Western religious duality of body and soul), and all things exist in interconnectedness—matter and spirit are not seen as being

in opposition, but rather work together to create a meaningful reality (Richards 209). Indigenous African spirituality encompasses animism, the belief that all objects and beings are endowed with spirit, and in fact the family and community become metaphysical realities, understood as a whole that includes the dead, the living, and the yet unborn (Richards 210). As Richards points out, "It is ancestor communion that gives wholeness gives meaning and definition to family members," and the ancestors, which may reappear in new forms, are a way to "keep in touch with sacred origins" (210).

In African indigenous traditions, spiritual realities are also timeless, not limited by Western linear conventions of time and space (211). As in the world of *Mama Day*, there "ain't really what you'd call change . . . it's all happened before and it'll happen again with a different set of faces" (163). And, as with Mama Day and Abigail's quilt, "when it's done right you can't tell where one ring ends and the other begins" (138). And, as Mama Day says when Cocoa claims to have forgotten the story of her birth, is not about "can't remember," but about "don't remember" (150). Memory of a spiritual past, of one's individual and ancestral "birth," is accessible for those who want to remember.

Related to these elements of spiritual life, Fisher also characterizes indigenous spiritualities as what, in the late twentieth century, might be called "ecological consciousness." This world view has also become a focus for feminist scholars, who now speak of reviving this indigenous spiritual and political stance through an "ecofeminism," characterized by its argument against "the mutual denigration of both women and nature in traditional Western thought and culture" (Cameron 270).<sup>6</sup> As Ardis Cameron describes it, ecofeminism "celebrates women's special relationship with nature, arguing that both tradition and biology have situated women in a position to bring about an ecological

revolution" (270). While ecofeminists debate the perils of upholding certain dualities of Western culture (positing female to male as nature to culture), many want to embrace and re-envision women's proximity to nature, *however* it was initially constructed, viewing it as "not degrading or limiting to women, but as a source of spiritual empowerment and political activism" (Cameron 270). Ardis Cameron's scholarship cites Alice Walker as one of a group of feminist writers who have "nourished ecofeminism through insistence on the interconnectedness of all things—of humans and plants, of science and everyday life, of trees and the air we breathe" (270). This approach, embedded in the indigenous African spiritual tradition that recognizes the interconnectedness of all things and which naturalizes the "supernatural," is also an important component of feminist spirituality, in that it recognizes that women's biological rhythms and creative forces mirror nature and that spiritual and physical well-being are connected to keeping harmony with nature (Carson 5-6).

*Beloved* is replete with embodiments of these philosophies, and the text connects them repeatedly to the female presence. For example, Baby Suggs' preaching takes place primarily in the Clearing, "a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place," associating her with nature and mirroring her spiritual powers with the natural order (87). In this natural space, her preaching to the Black people who "waited among the trees" demonstrates her understanding of the need for interconnectedness of the natural, the physical and the spiritual. She calls forward the children of the crowd, telling them, "Let your mothers hear you laugh" and we are told that "the woods rang" (87). Baby Suggs calls forward the men and tells them, "Let your wives and your children see

you dance,” and we are told that “the groundlife shuddered under their feet” (87). She calls forward the women and directs them to “Cry, for the living and the dead. Just cry,” and we are told that “without covering their eyes, the women let loose” (88). And as the narrator tells us,

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, 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 great big heart. (88)

The spiritual truth that Baby Suggs recognizes and shares with the Black community in her own form of spiritual celebration is that

Here, in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs, flesh  
that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. 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. And O my people they do not love  
your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave  
empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them.  
Touch others with them, pat them together . . . *You* got to love it,  
you! . . . This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be  
loved. (88)

Long after Baby Suggs is gone, Sethe returns to this place intermittently for

spiritual healing, as it “was still the green blessed place she remembered: misty with plant stream and the decay of berries” (89). This place is one of those where she had “claimed herself” (95). It is in this place of nature that we first see the spiritual union of the three women, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved: “The three women in the middle of the Clearing, at the base of the rock where Baby Suggs, holy, had loved” (97). We see the feminine presence at work again in the text with Paul D’s self-imposed exile at the church, wherein he is bereft of Sethe and her daughter, alone in a place described as tiny, lonesome and “cold as charity” (186, 218). Unable to face Sethe’s past, the presence of the ghost ancestor-daughter, and his own history, Paul D goes into seclusion, separated, except for Stamp’s brief visit, by his own inability to face the connectedness of past and present, of *all* things.

As a spiritual leader, Baby Suggs connects with nature and its rhythms, “smelling” the emotions of others, intuiting change and interpreting signs from the earth. She can read change in natural signs, such as in the sky, the leaves and the sounds of birds (138). Likewise, in *Mama Day*, the ancestral spiritual matriarch Sapphira was a “true conjure woman” who communed with nature, naturalized the so-called supernatural, and sought through her actions to mend the Western division of “spirit” and “matter,” working intimately with the cyclical, interconnected universe (3). As the myth goes, Sapphira “could walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot” (3). She “turned the moon into salve, the stars into a swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four” (3). Sapphira, the myth says, made “her way back to Africa” from the east bluff of Willow Springs one

night, “some say in body, others in mind” (206). Spiritually at least, Sapphira was a free woman: “A slave hadn’t lived in this house. And without a slave, there could be no master . . . He had claim to her body, but not her mind” (225).

Her descendent, Mama Day, carries on this spiritual inheritance of proximity to nature and a recognition of the need for interconnectedness. Mama Day is practically ancient, an enduring spiritual presence, the symbolic carrier of these old ways of the African-born Sapphira, possessing the ability to “show up in one century, make it all the way through the next, and have a toe inching over into the one approaching is about as close to eternity anybody can come” (7). We are told, “if some was waiting for her to die, they had a long wait. She says she ain’t gonna” (6). Mama Day rejects the impersonal and de-naturalized urban ideal, associating it with “white folks” (38). She is gifted with “second sight,” is an expert on herbs and natural remedies found in the old garden of her old house, “a garden designed by a woman,” and she interprets natural signs by examining the beads of water turning colors on the apricot leaf, a fresh broken egg, and the scent of the air (14, 34, 41, 44, 91, 225). Mama Day respects “sea life, birds and wood creatures,” knowing that “they got ways just like people” and that they offer the stories and guidebooks to living with nature (207). In nature, she finds the clues for living: “You just gotta watch all these creatures long enough to find out what’s going on in the elements where they live” (227).

Mama Day, rather than seeing the singular human being at the center of the cosmic order, recognizes, in harmony with African spiritual traditions, the equal interdependence of all things and all beings. When Abigail (who is associated with the ideology of Christianity much more than her sister is) hears of the coming storm and asks,

“What have I done to deserve this trouble?” Mama Day replies, “Abigail, stop your foolishness. All God got in mind is to send *you* a hurricane? It ain’t got nothing to do with us. . . . Sometimes I think we was only a second thought” (228). When Abigail protests, “Well, the Scriptures do say it: man was the last thing the Lord made,” Mama Day suggests playfully that “He shoulda quit while He was ahead” (228).

Mama Day watches natural signs in the changing seasons and orders her spiritual world with these cycles. These natural cycles are connected again to the female presence when we are told, “It’s the season for butterflies when Cocoa comes home” (148). She has learned to live in harmony with the natural world, as we see when Mama Day is scratched by a choke-cherry tree while walking in the woods at dusk and remembers the voice of her father, “No point in cussing. Little Mama, these woods have been here before you and me, so why should they get out your way—learn to move around ‘em” (78). Not only does Mama Day not “cuss” the offending choke-cherry tree, she uses its bark as an organic painkiller for the suffering Bernice (85). The image of the choke-cherry tree, which in *Beloved* is the scar of slavery, loss, and degradation on Sethe’s back, is here used by Naylor as a symbol of the duality of nature, the interconnected circles of nature and experience, and Mama Day’s ability to interact in harmony with it—thorns and salve alike. We know that from a young age Mama Day has been a spiritual person through her own brand of ecological consciousness:

Younger, the whole island was her playground: she’d walk through  
in a dry winter without snapping a single twig, disappear into the  
shadow of a summer cottonwood, flatten herself so close to the  
ground under a moss covered rock shelf, folks started believing

*John-Paul's little girl became a spirit of the woods* [emphasis added]. (79)

John-Paul had been known for his beautiful carvings of natural images, “But his oldest daughter did him one better: her trees sang and her flowers took flight” (224). In harmony with African indigenous traditions of spirituality, Mama Day lives her religion with spontaneity and immediacy, and finds spiritual meaning in all things, including the natural world:

Miranda kinda blooms when the evening air hits her skin. She stands for a moment watching what the last of the sunlight does to the sky down by The Sound. They say every blessing hides a curse, and every curse a blessing . . . It'll give you a sunset to stop your breath, no matter how long you been on the island. It seems like God reached way down into his box of paints, found the purest reds, the deepest purples, and a dab of midnight blue, then just kinda trailed His fingers along the curve of the horizon and let 'em all bleed down. And when them streaks of color hit the hush-a-by green of the marsh grass with the blue of The Sound behind 'em, you ain't never had to set foot in a church to know you looking at a living prayer. (78)

This spiritual harmony with nature includes common sense interaction with the forces of the natural world, in contrast with the character most strongly associated with a Christianity devoid of African spiritual sensibilities: “Pearl says if something big again is heading this way, her God will protect her. Miranda hopes He tells her to get her butt



away from low ground—she done built that house too close to the water” (236). Even in taking Bernice to the “other place,” Mama Day attempts to avoid “changing the natural course,” merely seeking to “use what’s there,” to harmonize human life with the natural order and spiritual wholeness (139). As Mama Day sees it, there “couldn’t be nothing wrong in helping Bernice to believe that there’s something more than there is” (139). When Bernice tries to thank Mama Day for giving her a son, the old woman replies, “I ain’t in the business of miracles, so I wasn’t the one to thank” (239).

Like that of Baby Suggs, Mama Day’s worldview recognizes and incorporates spirit and matter, rationality and intuition, as does indigenous spirituality. She understands that to separate the material from “mind,” and therefore from spirit, means a loss of power. Mama Day attempts to impart this spiritual knowledge to others, not always with the success she might hope for. Mama Day tries to help the panicked Frances, who believes her man is being bewitched by Ruby but is too frantic and self-focused to listen to a complex truth:

She ain’t understood a word I said. Miranda sighs . . . The mind is everything. She can dig all the holes she wants around Ruby’s door. Put in all the bits of glass and black pepper, every silver pin and lodestone she’ll find some fool to sell her. Make as many trips to the graveyard she wants with his hair, her hair, his pee, her pee. Walk naked in the moonlight stinking with Van-Van oil—and it won’t do a bit of good. ‘Cause the mind is everything (90).

Mama Day recognizes that spirit may inhabit matter, but that mind, body and spirit should ideally work together in harmony—they cannot be disassociated without a high

price. She frowns upon the hollow practice of “hoodoo mess,” the shallow and short-sighted spirituality that disembodies the connections of matter, mind and spirit, and seeks to use spiritual powers for opportunistic, self-serving ends (166). Unlike Ruby and Dr. Buzzard, who are most strongly associated with this type of “hoodoo” spirituality, Mama Day follows the spiritual worldview of indigenous Africa, recognizing the need for harmony and connection. Hoodoo does have the potential for power, but it associated with disconnection and destruction. Thus, Mama Day rejects it. As she says, “Ain’t no hoodoo anywhere as powerful as hate” (157). Mama Day recognizes a spiritual power of connection that she believes remains “greater than hate,” that can be manifested in human love and community (267). She puts her philosophy of unified mind, body and spirit into practice with Bernice, wherein her remedies give the young woman, more than anything, “time to use,” distractions for her mind so that nature can take its course unimpeded by Bernice’s untimely manipulations (96). In making up a remedy for Bernice, she tells Abigail, “The mind is a funny thing—and a powerful thing at that. Bernice is gonna believe they are what I tell her they are—magic seeds. And the only magic is that what she believes they are, they’re gonna become” (96). As she knows, and as both Frances and Ruby will discover, the spirit and the mind (as well as the human heart in all its will and affections) are most powerful when united.

Because Naylor closely associates Abigail with Christian faith in the novel, it is perhaps no surprise that she remains skeptical of some of Mama Day’s spiritual powers (associated with Afrocentric belief) and reticent about “the other place.” We know that Mama Day feels compelled to keep her activities at the “other place,” such as those with Bernice, hidden from her sister (96-97). Cocoa, in contrast to Abigail’s reticence, claims

to have “seen Mama Day do a lot of things out at the other place,” although “the kids at school called [her] a liar” (97). Mama Day responds to skepticism about the special power of the ancestral “other place,” and thus of the human mind and spirit, with a stoic response: “Folks see what they want to see . . . and for them to see what’s really happening here, they gotta be ready to believe” (97). The magical happenings of the “other place,” then, where “flowers can be made to sing and trees to fly,” are imaginative and truly powerful meetings of mind, matter and spirit, with the ancient Mama Day as priestess and shaman. As Mama Day has taught Cocoa from childhood, “you never say never . . . there are degrees to impossibilities” (163). The magic of Mama Day’s spiritual powers lies in her ability to see and take part in the great spiritual and cosmic harmonies so familiar to the indigenous traditions.

The indigenous spiritual tradition’s naturalizing of “supernatural” phenomena, its recognition of things labeled “irrational” by the Western tradition, and its belief in the circular continuum of time and space are repeatedly associated with women in these novels. The citified George, disconnected from nature, from his ancestry and from spiritual awareness, begins the journey toward spiritual reconciliation when he meets the child of Willow Springs and Mama Day. As George comes to recognize, Cocoa has “more than a family . . . a history” (129). Cocoa tells him “the rest of me—the whole of me—[is] here” on the island of Willow Springs, inhabited exclusively by Black people who make their own world, keep their own traditions, and intuitively remember the legacy of the powerful conjure-woman Sapphira Wade (176). Ophelia recognizes that in journeying with her to Willow Springs, George enters “a part of . . . existence that [he] was powerless in” (177). This powerful spiritual existence of Willow Springs is

intricately tied to the female presence, as George comes to realize: “There I go, thinking about women again, and there was a time when I didn’t have my whole world complicated with them” (247). Cocoa, we are told, is the female keeper of spiritual traditions, as “the other place holds no more secrets that’s left for [Mama Day] to find” and “the rest will lay in the hands of the Baby Girl—once she learns how to listen” (307). In loving Ophelia and encountering the consciousness of Mama Day’s world, George begins the journey toward a connection to a distant spiritual past. When George first meets Cocoa, he “operates by rituals” and football is his religion, because he is “fascinated with the mechanics of the game, the mixture of science, raw strength, and a touch of human unpredictability . . . its infinite possibility of moves” (145, 124). George says of his football, his great obsession, that it “produces a high that’s possible only when a man has glimpsed the substance of immortality” (124). As a spectator of football, George believes he has found a great spiritual rush in something that can be negotiated as science, with rationality, like a math problem. We are told that George is “so exacting,” not fully recognizing at first that “some things just couldn’t be boiled down to a formula that you could shove new elements into and have it all come out nice and neat” (145).

Early in his literal and metaphorical journey, George still believes that he makes his own luck, and is associated with the kind-hearted but spiritually shallow and opportunistic Dr. Buzzard, who insists that the attitude of ultimate self-reliance “ain’t a foolish policy” and is one he “leans on” himself (204). Even Dr. Buzzard recognizes the patterns of nature and ways outside the rational more than George does, suggesting as they fish together that “if the tides was against us, we’d have to be frying both good and bad luck for breakfast” (204). Even Dr. Buzzard, in the end, “knows how serious this

thing is that [George] can't believe" (287). George's narrative voice, speaking to Cocoa from the grave after his physical death, says, "Until you walked into my office that afternoon, I would have never called myself a superstitious man. Far from it. To believe in fate or predestination means you have to believe there's a future" (22).

In encountering Cocoa, George begins the difficult struggle to reconcile "facts" with "feelings" (27). During the storm at Willow Springs, identified as the "workings of Woman" who "has no name," George comes to recognize "God" (251). He says:

I hadn't thought about God much before then . . . When things were under control—and I lived my life so that was usually the case—there was no need to think about having to deal with some presence that might be governing what was beyond my own abilities . . . I saw the Bible as a literary masterpiece, but literature all the same; and Christianity owed its rules and regulations to politics more than anything else, while filling its pews with uncertainty and fear. Substitute the Torah, the Koran, the Bhagavad-Gita, a synagogue, a mosque, a temple, for all of the above and the formula still works perfectly . . . *But the winds coming around the corner of that tiny house on that tiny island was God* [emphasis added]. (252)

The orphaned, overly rationalistic George, the embodiment of Western ideals, has been raised with the belief that "only the present has potential," but his love affair with Cocoa and his journey to the Afrocentric, matriarchal Willow Springs begins to open George up to a more fully realized self and a genuine participation in community (23). When George

at last meets Mama Day and Abigail, the matriarchs of Willow Springs, he recognizes them at once as carriers of a spirituality he has been missing. He remembers this first meeting: “It must have taken me ten minutes to regain my equilibrium . . . How could these women ever die?” (175). It’s as if Mama Day, in sending off Cocoa’s letter to George containing a mysterious and magical “film of yellow powder,” beckons George’s spiritual self (54). The powder, which George likens to “goldenrod,” acts as a medieval tonic of gold, employed to treat problems of the heart, and in this case, of the soul—for George’s deficiencies are not only physical, they are spiritual (54). In the end, he finds it impossible to fully recognize that in their love Cocoa has “done bound up more than her flesh” with him and that, “since she’s suffering from something more than the flesh,” Mama Day “can’t do a thing” without him, without the communal response to a communal spiritual crisis (294). Appropriate to African indigenous belief, George’s spiritual journey begins with the female who embodies the spiritual code of interconnected, powerful bodies and spirits, for George realizes that to protect a safe world of utter self-reliance and rationality “You don’t get near a woman who has the power to turn your existence upside-down by simply running a hand up the back of her neck” (33).

The blurring of matter and spirit is a reality for the women of *Beloved*, as well, and a spiritual lesson for its men. Sethe carries on her back the literal bruising of slavery that also represent the personal and historical scars of the past. She has come to envision her knotted back as a tree in bloom, linking Sethe, even in her pain, to the regeneration and endurance of nature. Paul D’s most articulated spiritual experiences have come from stolen moments with nature under a tree, “because trees were inviting: things you could

trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to as he frequently did since way back” (21). We know that Paul D’s experiences of slavery and its aftermath have taken away this solace of the spiritual tree, and its association with the feminine:

In Alfred, Georgia, there was an aspen too young to call sapling.  
Just a shoot no taller than his waist. The kind of thing a man would  
cut to whip his horse. Song-murder and the aspen. He stayed alive  
to sing songs that murdered life, and watched an aspen that  
confirmed it, and never for a minute did he believe he could  
escape. Until it rained. Afterward, after the Cherokee pointed and  
sent him running toward blossoms, he wanted simply to move, go,  
pick up one day and be somewhere else the next. Resigned to life  
without aunts, cousins, children. Even a woman, until Sethe. (221)

This tree imagery is paralleled with the physical and metaphorical “tree” on Sethe’s back, the truths she carries, in which Paul D at first finds no spiritual solace because he cannot bear to identify himself with it, with all its implications. Early on, he can see it not as a tree, as Sethe has described it, but “in fact a revolting clump of scars . . . maybe shaped like one, but nothing like any tree he knew” (21). Paul D comes, by the end of the novel, to recognize and find peace again with Sethe’s “tree,” her physical marking of slavery and private anguish that coexists with her endurance, her love. He has opened his heart fully to Sethe’s presence and to the torturous secrets of his own history. In returning to Sethe and the forever-tree she carries on her back, he is spiritually rejuvenated: “Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers” (273). In this communion of healing with Sethe, Paul D again finds spiritual

sustenance that is associated with the female and with the natural world.

The indigenous tradition's recognition of natural cycles and an interconnectedness that blurs lines between the living and the dead show up repeatedly in these novels. The philosophy of a universe united in cycles of birth, death and rebirth, is embedded in these texts and is articulated and carried specifically by the female characters. Cocoa, for example, is open to hearing the voices of her dead ancestors upon visiting the "other place" with Mama Day. We are told that "John-Paul waits to guide them back as they thin out the foxglove at the head of his stone," and then we "hear" John-Paul's voice telling Cocoa the stories of the Willow Springs ancestors (151). These stories are of Sapphira and her sons, but they recognize and perhaps even privilege the female line. From the grave, John-Paul's voice tells Cocoa of his own son: "I gave him and his bride the house that Mama gave me. I passed on without seeing his children, but I knew they had to be girls. The seventh son of a seventh son is a special man" (151). Cocoa speaks to George after his death, remembering the way in which her husband had not yet been able to hear the voices of the ancestral dead, the connections to a spiritual past, when he came to Willow Springs:

Yes, George, you tried hard. But it would have been too much to ask for you to understand those whispers as we passed through my family plot. As soon as I put the moss in my shoes, I could hear them all in the wind as it moved through the trees . . . No, you didn't know this place. And you didn't know my people. (223)

George has been unable to recognize and gain sustenance from the Black ancestors, from the interconnectedness of past, present and future. As Cocoa remembers upon her return



to the “other place,” “A person is made up of much more than the ‘now’” (127).

Similarly, Bernice comes to “re-memory” the indigenous tradition of continuity when she addresses her dead son by telling him, “When I see you again, you’ll be forgiving of your old mama, who didn’t remember for a moment that you were still here” (269).

Baby Suggs also knows that “death [is] anything but forgetfulness” (4). Denver and Sethe recognize that “nothing ever dies” (36). Of course we know that the presence of the ghost Beloved, representative of both Sethe’s murdered infant and of the collective ancestral spirits of those who died in the “middle passage” dominates the narrative in that novel. The women of 124 take for granted this spirit world and its ability to be present in their everyday lives, “for they understood the source of the outrage as well as they knew the source of light” (4). This contrasts males in the novel, such as Sethe’s sons, Paul D, and Stamp Paid, who either by fear or force are driven off by the presence of the spirit. Denver is even comforted by the ghost, using it as a form of ordinary companionship:

None of them knew the downright pleasure of enchantment, of not suspecting but *knowing* the things behind things. Her brothers had known, but it scared them; Grandma Baby knew, but it saddened her. None could appreciate the safety of ghost company. Even Sethe didn’t love it. She just took it for granted—like a sudden change in the weather. (37)

This recognition of spiritual interconnectedness, so similar in kind to that espoused in the indigenous African tradition, is passed down from one generation of women to the next. Baby Suggs has taught Denver that she shouldn’t fear the ghost: “It wouldn’t harm me because I tasted its blood when Ma’am nursed me . . . I just had to watch out for it

because it was a greedy ghost and needed a lot of love, which was only natural, considering. And I do. Love her” (209). And in the end, it is this recognition of the ancestral spirit world and its connection to *this* life that leads Sethe to a new-found spiritual wholeness and healing, a personal reconciliation with a brutal past that comes from a full and honest “re-memory” of personal and collective history.

The women in *Beloved* are particularly associated with connection to the ancestral spirit world. As Stamp Paid observes when he comes near the house where Sethe, Beloved and Denver are closed up together with their re-memories, there is something that gives a man “pause” about the place: “Nothing fierce or startling. Just that eternal, private conversation that takes place between women” (172). Here, the women, like a secluded order of holy sisters, journey toward spiritual healing, which has been precipitated by the return of the ancestral child-ghost Beloved: “When Sethe locked the door, the women inside were free at last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds” (199). When Beloved’s presence begins to destroy Sethe and her connection to her daughter Denver, to the world beyond the past, the women of the Black community come together to free Sethe from it. Nor do most of them question the presence of the spirit or its validity—It is a natural fact: “The news that Janey got hold of she spread among the other coloredwomen. Sethe’s dead daughter, the one whose throat she cut, had come back to fix her” (255). Even the devoutly churched Ella, who identifies herself primarily with Christianity, contemplates the ghost in a rather straightforward fashion, recognizing it as a reality of an orderly, and circular, universe where all things can happen, where the dead can in fact come to life in various forms: “As long as the ghost showed out from its ghostly place—shaking stuff, crying, smashing and

such—Ella respected it. But if it took flesh and came in her world, well, the shoe was on the other foot. She didn't mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion" (257). In the end, it is the group of women, in community, encounter the spirit world head-on, together, without fear. This womanly confrontation with the mysteries of the universe is, for Sethe, a spiritual experience in itself:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. The singing women recognized Sethe at once and surprised themselves by their absence of fear when they saw what stood next to her. (261)

### **Conclusion**

Both *Beloved* and *Mama Day*, by asserting a thematic philosophy of indigenous African spirituality, also embody a philosophy of Black feminist spirituality. Morrison and Naylor have privileged the indigenous traditions in the worlds of these novels with a particular recognition of their openness to the female presence, the female power. Several fundamental elements of the African spiritual tradition, as they are re-membered and embraced by Morrison and Naylor, make way for the "power, value and dignity, and in some cases even the superiority of women" (Carson 5-6). They are open to a mirroring of the "Divine" with the "feminine," recognizing the importance of connections to nature

and asserting an image of the sacred that is immanent and accessible. Ultimately, these texts identify women not only as potent spiritual beings, but also as special stewards of African spirituality.

As Morrison has suggested, there is a “responsibility of passing from one generation to another the mythologies, the given qualities, stories, and assumptions which an ethnic group . . . keeps very much intact for survival” (Taylor-Guthrie 113). And, as Morrison has noted, political and economic thrusts of American life have tended to especially disrupt this for African-Americans, meaning that “something else has to take its place” (113). For Morrison, that something is the novel, and she says she seeks to “provide what the other culture did . . . a transition, a way to see what in fact the dangers are, what are the havens, and what is the shelter” for the African-American community (113). She points out that not only must the novel preserve the “richness of the past,” but it must offer “suggestions of what the use of it is,” creating a fictional world in which “it is comfortable to . . . both listen to the ancestry and to mark out what we might be doing sixty or one hundred years from now” (113). Morrison and Naylor, in these novels, both “listen to the ancestry” and mark out a philosophy of spiritual life that values both women and men, that recognizes women’s capacities for spiritual leadership, and that respects the dignity of and gives power to all members of the community, encouraging an integrated and organic philosophy of life. Here, carried and re-remembered by strong women, are the blueprints for spiritual life and for community.

Morrison and Naylor position women in roles of spiritual power and leadership, embracing the philosophy of a feminist spirituality. They revalue and artistically reconfigure the indigenous African goddess and ancestral leadership roles in these novels,

explicitly privileging women as stewards of spiritual traditions and guides for spiritual wholeness.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang McAninch-Runzi's dissertation on African-American women writers and liberation theologies goes into some detail documenting Richard Wright's stance on Christian religion and the Black church in America. Wright argues that Christianity has served as pulp and pacifier to keep the African-American masses in line with the political and social status quo. Alice Walker's essay, "The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven Is That You Have Been Driven Out of Your Mind (Off Your Land and Out of Your Lover's Arms): Clear Seeing Inherited Religion and Reclaiming the Pagan Self," which is published in her most recent collection, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism*, is a scathing criticism of Christianity's effects in the African-American community, particularly in terms of its patriarchal and Anglo-centric oppression of both women and men in the Black community.

<sup>2</sup> "Syncretic," as I use it in this study, refers to a "combining" or "reconciling" (as referred to in *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 1969 Edition). The term "syncretic" has become commonplace in both scholarly and popular discussions of world religions – For example, most recently in the *Utne Reader* article "God with a Million Faces," wherein journalist Jeremiah Creedon interviews scholars of religion and spirituality about the increasingly syncretic nature of American religiosity.

<sup>3</sup> For example, scholarship by Robert Broad has focused on Biblical representation and reconfiguration in *Beloved*. David Cunningham's work has examined Trinitarian rhetoric in the novel. Deborah Guth has focused on four Christian images and motifs in the novel, arguing that the text attacks Christianity on the planes of gender and the female body, subverting the Christian models. Elsie Mayer has explored naming in *Beloved*, with

special attention to the Biblical origins of the character Sethe's name. Carolyn Mitchell has argued that in this novel Morrison forges a reconnection between Christian religion and personal spirituality (defined as every-day lived experience of the sacred/God).

Danille Taylor-Guthrie spirituality (defined as every-day lived experience of the sacred/God). Danille Taylor-Guthrie looks at interaction between Christian and African traditions in the novel.

<sup>4</sup> Published scholarship on *Beloved*, in particular, has focused heavily on Christianity. This differs from my own focus, because I seek to look at African spirituality in its own right, on its own terms first and foremost. In opening this chapter, I seek to first give acknowledgment to the presence and importance of spirituality in the novel, to point out that the two traditions interact syncretically in African-American spirituality, but then to go on to focus directly on the African traditions that are present in this syncretic spirituality. Thus, Christianity itself lies on the periphery of my particular discussion.

<sup>5</sup> Many feminist scholars, among them Anne Carson, Mary Daly, Michele Pessoni, Lesley Northrup, Sheila Ruth, and Alice Walker, have produced scholarship on the tendency in the Judeo-Christian tradition toward disregarding, minimizing or silencing women's spiritual power.

<sup>6</sup> The term "ecofeminism" was coined by French writer Francoise d'Eubonne in 1974. Among the writers whose writings have embraced a philosophy of ecofeminism are: Celia Thaxter, Josephine Johnson, Rachel Carson, Annie Dillard, Lynn Andres, Alice Walker and Starhawk. See Cameron's essay "Ecofeminism" for a more in-depth discussion and bibliography on this subject.

## CHAPTER III

### **GODDESS POWER: ARCHETYPES OF A BLACK FEMALE DIVINE IN *BELOVED* AND *MAMA DAY***

In indigenous traditions that recognize a supreme creator figure, including many African traditions, gendered lines become blurred or irrelevant because the traditional languages "make no distinction between male and female pronouns and often see the divine as androgynous, a force arising from the interaction of male and female aspects of the universe" (Fisher 44). Many African traditions also recognize the Divine in gendered forms. African culture arose, after all, with the worship of powerful goddess figures (Adams 26). In both understandings of the deity, the female presence maintains potency because it is not subordinate under a hierarchy of male domination. As Patricia Monaghan has documented, in African indigenous spirituality the creator divinity is

often seen as bisexual or beyond gender, although the creator sometimes divides into two primary divinities, a mother goddess connected to the earth and human fertility, and a father god associated with celestial phenomena. This mother goddess further becomes an ancestor, the primal mother who gives birth to the first humans. (3-4)

Ideologies celebrating an androgynous Divine, or recognizing gendered divinities



coexisting with equal powers, stand in contrast to Western patriarchal hierarchies of religion and worldview, which tend to operate on a binary system that both overtly and covertly positions things "male" in opposition to and domination over things "female." Once again the African indigenous worldview proves compatible with a feminist spirituality. It recognizes a system of spiritual meaning or experience that insists on the power, value, and dignity of women, and it represents an openness to experiencing the Divine as a symbolic presence, goddess archetype or other entity that recognizes the female (Carson 5-6).

### **The Goddess Debate**

Feminist scholars have debated goddess religion and the much-discussed "golden age" of pre-patriarchal, female-run societies. These matriarchies were purportedly ruled by women who had methods of natural birth control (and thus control over their own sexuality) and worshipped a feminine Divine that reflected their own experience (Spretnak 541-549). Some anthropologists, such as Sally Binford, believe the evidence supporting the existence of utopian, goddess-based matriarchies inadequate, and they attribute the rise of scholarly work on goddess culture and the goddess archetype to "blind faith" and a distortion of history (Spretnak 543, 549). Binford insists that the matriarchy and goddess religions are largely "myth" and suggests that myths serve to uphold the status quo; Therefore, she argues, mythologizing goddess religion and culture damages the feminist movement rather than offers politically powerful, real knowledge. She says, "it is time to struggle with real issues of power and not to fritter away our energies rebuilding myths and doing our own versions of the Ghost Dance" (Spretnak 559).

Many other scholars, among them Merlin Stone and Charlene Spretnak, point

vehemently to 7,000 years of artifacts and 3,000 years of written historical material indicating the existence of ancient matriarchal and/or goddess-based cultures that were overthrown eventually by patriarchal groups, suggesting that academics who turn their backs on the evidence reveal “an intolerable religious bigotry” (551). These scholars argue that spirituality, the definer of worldview and ideology, remains *loaded* with political power and implications for social and economic change. Thus, they suggest, the “myth” of non-patriarchal goddess traditions serves as a valid, and in fact vital, area of study for feminists and a viable source of spiritual ideology for contemporary women (Spretnak 560-561).

Further anthropological work and scholarly dialogue are needed in this area, but that “myth” is inherently and undeniably powerful—on personal, political, and cultural levels. The many feminist scholars who find spirituality a valid, in fact crucial, area for women’s studies also adopt this stance. As Toni Morrison has recognized, myth has everything to do with cultural “survival,” with individual and group power, and with political and social reality (Taylor-Guthrie 113). Thus the vast scholarship from anthropologists and historians who are exploring indigenous goddess traditions remains worthy of attention. Culturally and psychologically, these archetypes remain important aspects of African spirituality—the African spirituality that Morrison suggests has, in some forms, survived among Black Americans. The goddess archetypes are being recognized and revalued by feminist scholars, and by African-American women writers such as Morrison and Naylor, because of the powerful female presence they envision.

## **Faces of the African Goddess**

Patricia Monaghan has catalogued anthropological and historical evidence across African periods and regions, specifying some of the identities and powers of the culture's indigenous goddesses. The attributes of these goddesses reflect many of the fundamental concerns of African indigenous religion, including the interconnections of life and death, community, and harmony with nature. Among the African goddess archetypes explored in Monaghan's scholarship are those that represent the Creator earth mother who also frequently governs over the realm of the dead, goddesses who oversee communal loyalty, morality and law, and goddesses of harvest, some of whom speak through mediums. These goddesses include Ala of Nigeria, Asase Yaa of Ghana, and Oddudua of the Yoruba in Nigeria. Other African goddesses are understood as warriors, as leaders of female rituals (such as dancing and singing) and secret societies, and/or as guides for family life. Among these are Atete of Ethiopia, Ngwa Ndundi of the Kongo, and Oshun and Oya of the Yoruba in West Africa. Some of these goddesses, such as Kaikara of Uganda and Nyamwanda of Zaire, are associated with spirit possession and brining the dead back to life. Others, such as Sabulana of Machekekeni and Oshun of the Yoruba, are also understood as patrons of female leadership and/or rescuers of the community. The positioning of the goddess as a powerful creative force, liaison to the spirit world, and communal guide, is best exemplified in the naming of Oddudua of Nigeria, the primary mother goddess of the Yoruba, whose name means "she who exists for herself and to create others."

## **Re-Memory of Goddess Power in *Beloved***

As Michele Pessoni has argued in her study, "She was laughing at their God:

Discovering the Goddess Within in *Sula*,” both Morrison and Naylor begin to explore “the possibility of discovering divinity and meaning from within, of reconnecting to the feminine archetype buried deep within the human psyche in order to resurrect a way of seeing and feeling which offers the promise of healing and life to an ailing world” (439). In addition, I suggest that by exploring the goddess archetype in *Beloved* and *Mama Day*, Morrison and Naylor allocate spiritual power specifically to women, designating them as vital stewards of cultural values and privileging a feminist spirituality. The indigenous goddess, as she is embedded and imagined in these novels, takes on special significance because she represents a Black female deity mirroring and in touch with the natural realm and very much immanent in human women, here in this world. The goddess of Morrison’s and Naylor’s feminist spirituality is culturally and historically relevant to the lives of African-American women, individually accessible and insistent on the power, value, and dignity of the female presence.

As Jacqueline Trace has documented, images of the goddess are posited against a negatively charged patriarchal deity throughout *Beloved*:

God, when referred to as “He,” is watchful, punishing and cruel.

“He” took away from Baby Suggs all her children save one (23). . .

.When she treats her parishioners to a feast of chickens and

blueberry pies, she incurs their envy, for “loaves and fishes were

His powers,” not the business of an ex-slave and a woman. . . . In

the end, Baby, tired out by the whitefolks, renounces the “father

religion”: “God puzzled her and she was too ashamed of Him to

say so” (177). (18-19)

Schoolteacher believes that a patriarchal “God” has sanctified the slavery of African-Americans, noting “the trouble it was, and the loss,” when “you overbeat creatures God had given you the responsibility of” (150). What Schoolteacher is focused on here is his economic loss and the need for domination, based on a system rationalized by a patriarchal deity. Knowing the ironies of Schoolteacher’s ideology and action when we read these lines, we as readers are confronted with a male God associated with extreme injustice, and with the cultural and psychological devaluation of an entire race of human beings.

In contrast, Morrison’s re-imaginings of the indigenous African goddess in this novel offer a vision of a Divine who is imminently present in the lives of African-American women—and connects them in benevolent community with others. Sethe re-embodies Oya, the Yoruba warrior goddess who is also a patron of female leadership. At first consideration, Sethe’s “warrior” acts do not seem to connect her to “benevolent community.” Sethe takes on the role of the warrior when she kills her baby girl—the act is one of violence that resonates on both the personal and the political levels and is loaded with moral implications. Although this act is brutal and, it might well be argued, misguided, it is important to recognize the implications of Sethe’s warrior act. Ultimately the text asks us to recognize, as Sethe, her lover, her daughter and her community must, that her act has been an abnormal response in an abnormal reality—a drastic action that somehow makes sense in a drastic circumstance where all morality is inverted, in the context of institutionalized slavery. Like Baby Suggs, we as readers can perhaps neither “approve nor condemn Sethe’s rough choice,” although the text also suggests that Baby

Suggs, and we as readers, might be “saved” by coming to some clarity regarding the killing (180). Sethe believes she killed because her “love was tough,” because her child “had to be safe and [Sethe] put her where she would be” (200). As Stamp knows, “she ain’t crazy. She love those children. She was trying to out-hurt the hurter” (234). Sethe believes that the killing is an act of protection of the individual, that “if I hadn’t killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her” (200). Sethe becomes the warrior because she knows “what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble,” the reality that “anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill or maim you, but dirty you . . . Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up” (251). Sethe says that “whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean” (251).

Sethe’s motivation to “protect” her daughter, then, suggests a deep need to reconcile herself to her own horrific experiences, to re-memory her own value, and to protect her “clean” part. The “best thing” also symbolizes the wider community that is intricately connected to an individual “self,” particularly in African spiritual belief. This killing protection of her individual child from enslavement resonates at a much broader level, as a protection of the larger community of African-Americans from the long-perpetuated horrors of slavery. As William Handley puts it, the girl Beloved inhabits both West African and American cultural spaces; she is “emblematic of both African survival and American loss” (679). She is Sethe’s lost African self (Rigney 232). Her death and rebirth are emblematic of the struggles of Sethe’s larger community, its African legacy, and its historical disenfranchisement. Although the paradox of killing her child to save

her from death seems irreconcilable at first, the point is that Sethe values her own, wants to preserve them somehow, wants to protect the sanctity of her connection to her children and their right to survive as whole human beings who are the hope for cultural and racial survival. For Sethe, death is not the end and is preferable to allowing the Anglo slave trade to continue to systematically destroy her children, herself, her larger community—a community that Sethe becomes reconciled to when the Black women join together to remember and reclaim her, to free her from the historical ghost-gone-bad that *Beloved* has become. The warrior-goddess Sethe vows that “nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. I never had to give it to nobody else—and the one time I did it was took from me—they held me down and took it” (200). Even in the violence against her child, knowing of course that it meant physical death, Sethe uses her power in an attempt to preserve African-American community, to bring peace to her children: “her plan was always that they would all be together on the other side, forever” (241).

Sethe makes an important move toward reconciling herself to her past when she redirects the destructive power of the goddess at the novel’s end. When Sethe wields the ice pick at Mr. Bodwin as he comes into her yard, she imagines him as “the man without skin,” “coming into her yard, coming for her best thing” (261). She re-lives and re-invents a *new* version of that afternoon in the shed. This time, “the ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand,” and she leaves *Beloved* only to direct her violence more appropriately toward the source of her misery, the symbolic figure of the white man (261). Sethe’s violence, turned not toward her people but toward the source of their misery, is a significant factor in the eradication of the greedy ghost of the past. The warrior goddess Sethe in some sense puts to rest the individual and collective violence of the past that has

served to fragment and haunt the African-American community, turning her vengeance into a procreative act of protection.

The goddess's connection to survival of community is also mirrored in Baby Suggs. Like Oya, she is a patron of female leadership; like Ngwa Ndundi and Nyamwanda she is associated with spirit communication, and like Nyavirezi she has the ability to tell the future—roles that will again surface in the discussions of the next chapter. Baby Suggs is also a representative of Oya's "dancing goddess" aspect. She brings together her community in spiritual union through dance, inviting the men to celebrate in this manner first, asking them to "let your wives and children see you" (88). It is significant that Baby Suggs begins by encouraging the *men* to worship through dance, evoking an ancient African spiritual ethic. Dance is an ecstatic ritual outside, for the most part, mainstream American religious experience, particularly taboo for men. However, in African tradition it is of great value as a spiritual expression.<sup>1</sup>

Baby Suggs is also a representative embodiment of the African goddess Sabulana, who rescued her people from starvation. When Baby Suggs organizes a meal, it quickly evolves into a community party for 90 people, and the house becomes a place of merriment and love (136). We are told that these 90 people "ate so well, and laughed so much, it made them angry" (136). The feast given by Baby Suggs is a metaphor for the spiritual nourishment and community that Baby Suggs, in her leadership as an itinerant preacher and protecting matriarch, provides. In this case, the community is not quite ready to fully join together in benevolence. The neighbors begin to resent Baby Suggs and to feel threatened by the bounty that she offers them—she whom they suddenly and wrongly imagine as "an ex-slave who had probably never carried one hundred pounds to



the scale, or picked okra with a baby on her back” (137). In this incident we see another way in which slavery still haunts this African-American community, the way a history of degradation after being taken from the African homeland has produced fragmentation and dis-unity where there should be cohesion. The breakdown of African spiritual values of community is directly linked, as the text here suggests, to the fragmenting experiences of slavery, and it continues to haunt the Black community even in a state of relative freedom. In hosting a literal feast, Baby Suggs also offers a metaphorical rescue from spiritual and cultural starvation. By the end of the novel, the women of the community advance toward reunification when they join together to help Sethe, Baby Suggs’ outcast daughter-in-law. Baby Suggs has left them a legacy, the raw materials with which to remember themselves in one another and heal through community:

When they caught up with each other, all thirty, and arrived at 124, the first thing they saw was not Denver sitting on the steps, but themselves. Younger, stronger, even as little girls lying on the grass asleep . . . Baby Suggs laughed and skipped among them, urging more. Mothers, dead now, moved their shoulders to mouth harps. The fence they had leaned on and climbed over was gone. The stump of the butternut had split like a fan. But there they were, young and happy, playing in Baby Suggs’ yard, not feeling the envy. (258)

As Trace has argued, the central female characters of *Beloved* “achieve union with the deity within, which animates them to produce miracles. The two central mythologies in *Beloved*, Denver’s birth-myth and *Beloved*’s rebirth-myth, featuring Sethe as the Great

Mother, focus on the hermetic nature of creation” (21). Sethe does indeed connote the goddess archetypes of the Great Mother. She is the Ala and the Asase Yaa, the Gonzuoloe and Isong, the Oddudua, containing the divine aspect within her very human self, here in this world. Sethe taps into the divinity of the archetypal creative, life-giving goddess by birthing the heroic Denver, who, from the womb, “pulled a whitegirl out of the hill” to save her mother’s life, and who as an adult again re-births her mother by bringing the community to Sethe’s aid (42, 243). Sethe, the text tells us, gives birth to “what God had in mind” when she delivers Denver (84).

Yet I diverge slightly from Trace’s argument of “the hermetic nature of creation” by suggesting that the creative goddess of *Beloved*, while indeed embodying “the deity within,” is also realized powerfully in community. It is this sense of connection among women, the communal goddess, that makes this particular archetypal embodiment seem so essentially African. Together, Sethe and Denver embody the Great Mother goddess archetype by restoring the ancestor child-ghost Beloved to life. The living Beloved, who arrives at 124 Bluestone Road as Denver’s wish-fulfillment and Sethe’s unfinished business, has been waiting in a “dark” place where she is “small” and “curled up” with “no room to move in” (75). Fetus-like, she has been unrealized, unremembered, the murdered infant and the slave of the Middle Passage, the unborn dead—finally rising up out of the water like an African Venus, given life by Sethe’s grief and love and Denver’s longing (50). We are told that Beloved “came back because of” Sethe, that they share the same face, that they remember a “quiet time” when they played together (215). Prior to Beloved’s rebirth, “in the beginning,” she has seen “the woman . . . with the face [she] wants” (211). Morrison binds together the creator and the created, wherein each of the

three women take on the aspect of the Great Mother goddess, exchanging powers and roles with great fluidity. For Denver, “the job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved” (243). Beloved, in returning, gives new life to the lonely Denver, but also eventually serves an impetus for Denver to leave the yard, to become an active agent, a new self (243). Beloved also re-births Sethe, who, for a time, celebrates the return of her lost child with jubilation, as a newly rediscovered self. When Beloved is first recognized as the lost daughter, the “new” Sethe believes herself reborn, “smiling at the things she would not have to remember now” (182). Beloved re-births Sethe in eliciting the stories, the healing re-memory, of Sethe’s past, of her own mother (58). Beloved plays a role in precipitating Sethe’s final re-birth by disappearing “right before their eyes” at the novel’s end, advancing Sethe’s time of dark contemplation, her reunion with the newly-validating Paul D, and her realization of her own true worth (263).

These births and rebirths are vitally connected to their counterpart, death, preserving the indigenous belief in the continuum of existence. Sethe, reflecting indigenous African spiritual beliefs about death and the ancestors, says of her daughter Denver, “I’ll protect her while I’m live and I’ll protect her when I ain’t” (45). Like the African goddess Asase Yaa, who both gives life and takes life away, Sethe is associated not only with Denver’s birth and the re-birth of Beloved, but with the deaths, both literal and metaphorical, that are a part of the procreative cycle. The communal circle of life, death, and rebirth is preserved by these goddess-characters in the novel. We know that Sethe has murdered one of her children, the baby girl, taking her life in an attempt to keep her from the horrors of slavery (149). As Sethe begins to remember and tell the stories of

her life in slavery, the ghost-child Beloved's body begins to dismember, to fall apart (133). Beloved in turn takes on the powers of the goddess when she, in her needy rage, begins "killing" Sethe. As Beloved grows fatter, Sethe grows more thin, frail, and exhausted (243). Denver sees that "Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that," and that "if Sethe didn't wake up one morning and pick up a knife, Beloved might" (251, 242). With the help of the women of the Black community, led by Denver's initiative, Sethe is re-birthed once again, delivered from the over-hungry ghost-child and from her own spiritual self-punishment. This time, the Beloved who has become a destructive and insatiable ghost of the past loses her vitality at the hands of women who take "a step back to the beginning," as she cuts through the woods, "a naked woman with fish for hair," returning to the primal waters of the stream (259). Beloved's association with bodies of water and their link to her state of life-in-death connotes the African goddess Atete, who was celebrated in all-female rituals involving processions to river banks. Significantly, as Carol Schumde points out, Beloved's haunting at 124 Bluestone Road is located between the Ohio River, which marks the boundary between slave and free territory, and a stream marking "the watery boundary African myth places between the worlds of the living and the dead" (410).

The Black goddess figure Sethe, by the end of the novel, completes another creative cycle of incarnation when she metaphorically re-births herself, the self she has not yet fully realized and valued, the spiritual self at peace with the past. Here again Sethe takes on the powers of Nyamwanda, the goddess who brings the dead back to life. The novel ends as Paul D returns to complete the tie of his communion with Sethe, the

female embodiment of his longings for spiritual peace, recognizing her as her own “best thing” (273). He has, spiritually speaking, come a long way from his inability to truly see the faces of the goddess in Sethe, “this here new Sethe” who “didn’t know where the world stopped and she began” (164). Paul D, in the end, helps Sethe to complete her spiritual rebirth by truly seeing her need both for communion and for “self,” reminding her of her own spiritual worth. She answers, finally, “Me? Me?” (273). This reflexive recognition reconnects sister, daughter, and mother, who spiritually “join” in a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, sharing the special procreative powers of the goddess (213). Each woman, Sethe, Denver and Beloved, along with Baby Suggs in leaving her own spiritual legacy, has embodied the Nigerian Oddudua, the great creator whose name means ‘she who exists for herself and to create others.’

These archetypal powers are individually accessed by the women and bring about individual spiritual growth for both Sethe and Denver. They, also, though, ultimately bring Sethe and Denver into closer communion with others—with the circle of the African-American community—completing in some sense the dreams of Baby Suggs’ unfinished business as a mother-goddess and preacher to her people. And finally, the creative powers of the Great Mother goddess bring all that the child-ghost Beloved signifies back to the consciousness of those who must make peace with her shadow.

The power of the goddess in the giving and taking of life is here configured by Morrison to symbolize Sethe’s struggles to make peace with her personal history, to find a personal grace in coming to terms with her own powers, her own will and her own memory. These expressions of the goddess’s creative/destructive power also connote the death and rebirth—physical, cultural, and spiritual—of African-Americans, suggesting

the collective history of Black displacement and slavery, as well as a possibility for rebirth. This rebirth, Morrison's text implicitly suggests, is possible at the personal, the cultural, and the spiritual levels, all of which are intertwined. Most importantly, Morrison again implicates African-American women, who here embody the faces of the goddess, as potent keepers of spiritual beliefs and spiritual healing. Their powers to access the Divine within the self, to experience it here in this world, and to call upon the deity for "spiritual and creative uses" connect these women to a vibrant feminist spirituality. As Jacqueline Trace has suggested,

The dark goddesses of *Beloved* are . . . subsumed and sustained by a psycho-religious awareness that Morrison takes great pains to set before us. Their collective, matriarchal insight into Self makes of them interpreters and prophets of their society, not mere Tar Ladies of the laundry and kitchen. In creating and transmitting myths from their own experience, they offer to their culture a morality and theology of wide dimensions. (28)

### **Re-Memory of Goddess Power in *Mama Day***

*Mama Day*, like *Beloved*, parallels feminist spirituality with a patriarchal deity who seems distant and, as "He" is understood by folk such as Pearl, even ridiculous. The local gossip and avid church-goer Pearl's patriarchal He-God is punishing and either senseless or at the very least, entirely unknowable. We are told that Pearl sees Bernice's inability to become pregnant as "a judgement from God" (72). Pearl's belief in an ominous and distant deity whose ways are experienced as arbitrary and cruel is countered by Mama Day's common-sense spirituality when she responds, "If Pearl thinks all God

got to worry about is two young people hearing some of that silly boogie-woogie music, then He ain't worth serving" (72). The ironies of Pearl's assurances of salvation from her patriarchal God, considering her hypocrisy and her use of the church as an opportunity to display fashion and gather gossip, create a contrast to Mama Day's belief. She recognizes that Pearl's constant prattling of judgmental religious dogma, all in the name of a patriarchal God, represents pretension of devout spirituality: "If getting into heaven meant being heard by the Lord, Pearl had herself a guaranteed ticket" (92).

When Mama Day grasps at remembering the stories of her ancestral past as a key to dealing with the threats to her grand-niece in the present, she "gets down on her stiffened knees and prays to the Father and Son as she'd been taught. *But she falls asleep, murmuring the names of women. And in her dreams she finally meets Sapphira*" (280, emphasis mine). Mama Day's re-memory of Sapphira symbolizes a re-valuation of indigenous traditions and of an ancestral spirituality that values the female presence. As Mama Day tells Abigail, "we ain't even told baby girl . . . and we should, you know . . . it ain't nothing to be ashamed of, it's her family and her history. And she'll have children one day" (116). Mama Day's need or desire to pass the name, and the story, of Sapphira on to Cocoa is Naylor's suggestion that female power and female spirituality are legacies to be remembered. The deity in this novel associated with community, with accessibility, and with the precepts of feminist spirituality is undoubtedly "She," and is embodied in central female characters who reflect the indigenous African goddess.

In *Mama Day*, the legendary Sapphira Wade is a powerful goddess figure, evoking the spiritual archetypes of an ancestral home. She is "African-born" and "don't live in the part of our memory we can use to form words" (5,4). In telling George of her

great-great grandmother Sapphira, Cocoa describes her as the “great, great, grand, Mother – as if listing the attributes of a goddess” (218). Sapphira’s spirit, when Mama Day encounters it in the woods, hums “some lost and ancient song” (118). She is credited with magical, larger-than-life powers and with setting slaves free on the island of Willow Springs, founding a Black quasi-utopia, and bearing seven sons – the seventh son of the seventh son producing the spiritual matriarch Mama Day (3).

Candle Walk represents a goddess celebration – one which “old Reverend Hooper couldn’t stop” (108). As Mama Day says,

that’s what happens when you get them outside preachers who think they know more than they do. When you open up your mouth too much, something stupid’s bound to come out, talking about folks should call it Christmas. Any fool knows Christmas is December twenty-fifth . . . and Candle Walk is always the night of the twenty-second. Been that way since before Reverend Hooper and it’ll be that way after him. (108)

The myth of Candle Walk’s origins recognizes the ancestral goddess-figure as embodied in the African-born Sapphira:

Looking over here from beyond the bridge, you might believe some of the more far-fetched stories about Willow Springs. The island got spit out from the mouth of God, and when it fell to the earth it brought along an army of stars. He tried to reach down and scoop them back up, and found Himself shaking hands with the greatest conjure woman on earth. “Leave ‘em here, Lord,” she said. “I ain’t



got nothing but these poor black hands to guide my people, but I  
can lead on with light.” (110)

The Candle Walk ritual is associated with spirituality by its proximity in date to the Christian celebration of Christmas, and we know that “it’s been going on since before [the inhabitants of Willow Springs] were born, and the ones born before them” (110). In line with the focus on unity with nature, accessibility, and community of the goddess traditions and of feminist spirituality, the ritual is celebrated by the mutual exchange of greetings at a communal gathering and the exchange of gifts—“as long as it came from the earth and the work of your own hands” (110). In Candle Walks of earlier times, community members symbolically looked back to Africa by facing east, “humming some lost and ancient song,” “moving through the east woods out to the bluff over the ocean,” repeating a mantra recognizing the power of the indigenous goddess: “Lead on with light, Great Mother. Lead on with light” (111). Mama Day’s father, John-Paul, told his daughter that in his day “people kinda worshipped his grandmother, a slave woman who *took* her freedom in 1823” (111). We know that “folks in John-Paul’s time would line the main road with candles, food, and slivers of ginger to help her spirit along” and that the Candle Walks before John-Paul’s father’s time were “different still . . . But that’s where the recollections end—at least, in the front part of the mind” (111).

Mama Day taps into the “part of the mind,” or spirit, that reaches back to the past, to the spiritual values of a distant African homeland. As a preserver, she cannot imagine breaking the chain of cultural memory and spiritual tradition associated with Candle Walk. She anticipates the future: “By then, she figures, it won’t be the world as we know it no way—and so no need for the memory. But looking at Willow Springs

tonight, it's impossible to imagine such a day coming" (112). The symbolic light of Candle Walk, Mama Day comes to realize, represents the light Bascombe Wade carried in looking with his "broken heart" for his lost lover-goddess Sapphira, who, as the myth goes, left him to return to Africa (206). The light, in some sense, is a guide for wanderers of a new place and time, a marker of a path to spiritual re-memory. It is a marker of contact with an ancestral past and celebration of a distant homeland, in the form of ritual tradition. Mama Day plays a vital part, as a preserver of indigenous spirituality and an embodiment of female power, in ensuring that the values and myths of the past will continue to be told and lived.

Like Sapphira, Mama Day connotes the goddess. Even in all her earthy humanity, she has an ancient, timeless quality: "And when you think about it, to show up in one century, make it all the way through the next, and have a toe inching over into the one approaching is about as close to eternity anybody can come" (6-7). She is associated, like Sapphira, with special powers and magic, although Mama Day's are especially rooted in an earthy, natural sensibility:

As they round the bend by that old pine stump, the brown woman's walking cane becomes a thing of wonder. Remember this – a wave over a patch of zinnias and the scarlet petals take flight. And this—winged marigolds follow them into the air. Listen—A thump of the stick: morning glories start to sing. The other place. Butterflies and hummingbirds. And the wisdom to draw them. (152)

Although she is not literally a mother herself, Mama Day is associated with the

Great Mother archetype. The African goddesses Gonzuoloe and Isong resonate profoundly in Mama Day's link to fertility. She is bountifully full of "mother-wit" (97). When she thinks of her lost opportunity for giving birth, Mama Day says, "[I] gave to everybody but myself. Caught babies till it was too late to have my own . . . Abigail's had three and I've had—Lord, can't count 'em—into the hundreds. Everybody's mama now" (89). Mama Day's maternity, then, becomes larger-than-life, fitting for a goddess of procreation. She is consistently associated with her chickens and their eggs, symbols evoking female sexuality, fertility and procreation (34, 41, 139, 171, 295). Mama Day, along with Abigail, mothers Cocoa and has been an important surrogate in that role (58). She is also linked to motherhood in her capacities as a healer, folk physician, and midwife—roles to be further illuminated in the next chapter.

The depiction of Mama Day that most aligns her with the Great Mother archetype is her ritual with Bernice at the "other place." The mother-goddess waits in her rocking chair for Bernice to come in secret, at night, to the place where "flowers can be made to sing and trees to fly" (139). Bernice comes looking for Mama Day with "hope that finds a voice," in a desperate wish to conceive a child (139). Mama Day's magic is grounded in a common sense earthiness—she seeks to help Bernice "to believe that there's something more than there is," just "using what's there" (139). The natural Mother goddess with her symbolic chick and egg transforms Bernice psychologically and spiritually in a conception rite, emphasizing Mama Day's connection to female sexuality and creation; Bernice believes that "it can't be human hands no way, making her body feel like this" (140). She has a spiritual experience as Mama Day performs her "magic," wherein Bernice is acutely aware of her body and its senses, yet becomes transcendent:

If she could scream, she would, as the touching begins deeper at the points of her fingertips to expand the pores that let in air, caressing down the bones of each finger joint to the ones that join the palm, the wrist, the lower arms. Her shoulders, sides, and stomach made into something more liquid than water, her breasts and hips flowing up against the pull of the earth. She ain't flesh, she's a center between the thighs spreading wide to take in . . . the touch of feathers. Space to space. Ancient fingers keeping each in line. . . . Pulsing and alive—wet—the egg moves from one space to the other. A rhythm older than woman draws it in and holds it tight. (140)

Mama Day remains humble and secretive about her fertility ritual, but it is undeniably powerful (87, 97). Shortly after Mama Day's fertility rite, Bernice becomes a mother, giving birth to Little Caesar (161). Again we see the procreative goddess configured to foster community and connection—Mama Day creates new life through Bernice, with Bernice. They become partners in motherhood, the communal creator goddess.

The destructive aspect of the Great Mother goddess's procreative power is also configured in this novel. Mama Day's fertility rite is inverted when Bernice's child dies in the storm. Bernice, desperate and in shock, brings the body of Little Caesar to the other place, hoping that Mama Day can restore his life (258). Bernice and Mama Day stand silently in the rain together as Bernice holds her dead child. They wait together, keeping vigil until "a clear sunrise" when "the orioles take to wing, the bruised morning glories open" (259). Finally Mama Day "stretches out her hand to touch the broken face

of the other woman. Go home, Bernice. Go home and bury your child” (259). This scene represents the indigenous African circle of life, death, and rebirth that Mama Day trusts in, and that Bernice will, by the time of her son’s funeral, also re-memory. Mama Day’s grieving the loss of Little Caesar demonstrates a spirituality of immediacy and questions her own use of the goddess powers within:

More crushing, just a bit more crushing than that baby’s death , is  
the belief that his mama came to her with. There’ll be no  
redemption for that. She ain’t gotta worry about going to hell. Hell  
was right now. Daddy always said that folks misread the Bible.  
Couldn’t be no punishment worse than having to live here on earth,  
he said. (261)

Mama Day questions her own inner divinity, and we are reminded that even as she carries the sacred within her, she remains a very human woman, capable of doubt and frailty. When contemplating her spiritual gift, she wonders, “but who asked her for it? Who made her God?” (262). The text aligns itself with feminist spirituality once again in its ability to represent spiritual power as intimately present in the real lives of human beings. Mama Day contains the powers of the Divine, but she is also fully human—she must come to terms with her own spiritual potential, with the multiple faces of creative power. She

rocks and thinks of the things she can make grow. The joy she got  
from any kind of life. Can’t nothing be wrong in bringing on life,  
knowing how to get under, around and beside nature to give it a  
slight push. Most folks just don’t know what can be done with a

little will and their own hands. But she ain't never, Lord, she ain't never tried to get *over* nature. There is things you can do and things you can't" (262).

Mama Day, after struggling through this period of doubt and despair following Little Caesar's death, puts the destructive, warrior powers of the Great Mother goddess to use in preserving her family line and saving Cocoa from the powers of hatred. Mama Day goes to Ruby's house to confront the "hoodoo" Ruby has used to harm Cocoa (269). Ruby hides from Mama Day, refusing to face the matriarch, refusing to face up to her own abuse of power—an abuse which is, significantly, wielded *by* woman, *against* woman. Mama Day then harnesses the natural powers of the warrior goddess, also connoting the ancestral Sapphira, when she warns Ruby, with the symbolic markings of a circle, to lay aside her hatred:

She brings that cane shoulder level and slams it into the left side of the house. The wood on wood sounds like thunder. The silvery powder is thrown into the bushes. She strikes the house in the back. Powder. She strikes it on the left. Powder. She brings the cane over her head and strikes it so hard against the front door, the window panes rattle. . . . The door don't open when she leaves, and the winds don't stir the circle of silvery powder. . . . The lightning is flashing in the clouds. . . . It hits Ruby's twice, and the second time the house explodes. (273)

The destructive power of the Great Mother goddess also surfaces through a feminized storm. Sapphira is strongly associated with the powerful storm that

demolishes the bridge linking Willow Springs to the mainland, and the storm is a metaphor for the ancestral presence and the unremembered African ways she represents. Sapphira here is likened to Oya, the Yoruba goddess of storms, a warrior goddess. The storm in this novel “starts on the shores of Africa, a simple breeze among the palms and cassavas, before it’s carried off, tied up with thousands like it, on a strong wave heading due west” (249). Connoting the Middle Passage and the historical and cultural displacement of slavery, the storm is “restless and disturbed, no land in front of it, no land in back, it draws up the ocean vapor and rains fall like tears” (249). This storm is destructive, ripping through sugar cane, “stripping juices from their heart, shedding red buds from royal poincianas as it spins” (249). It eventually arrives in Willow Springs, smashing the rocks with its waves, but sparing the oak tree at Chevy’s pass, the other place, and Bascombe Wade’s tombstone, which “trembles but holds” (250). The narrator tells us that “prayers go up in Willow Springs from what could only be the workings of Woman. And She has no name” (251). The inhabitants of Willow Springs come together in community to bury the child who has died in the storm and to rebuild a bridge to the mainland. They complete both tasks in their own way, on their own time, coming together to survive (270). The goddess, configured here as a storm connoting the African Sapphira, has once again taken away life just as she has given it, and even her destruction, associated as it is with the natural world, contains creative, life-affirming possibilities for the community.

## **Conclusion**

In *Beloved* and *Mama Day*, Morrison and Naylor have re-imagined the indigenous African goddess archetypes, forming an ideological vision of feminist

spirituality. This spirituality affirms the worth and the powers of women, is consistently connected to the natural world and to the accessible creative powers of the Divine. It reflects the deity in the lives of real women, affirming their personal, historical and cultural realities. Morrison and Naylor privilege the powers of the goddess, envisioning women's spiritual efficacy as a source for individual and communal healing.



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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> See Dona Richards' article, "The Implications of African-American Spirituality" for a more extensive background discussion on the topic. She discusses dance as one important aspect of African spiritual expression.

## CHAPTER IV

### SPIRITUAL SPECIALISTS: WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN *BELOVED* AND *MAMA DAY*

As Mary Pat Fisher's anthropological scholarship points out regarding indigenous spiritual traditions, "in certain places and beings, the power of spirit is believed to be highly concentrated" (49). In indigenous spiritualities, including African, spiritual leaders are characterized by a "vital force that makes it possible to act with unusual strength, insight, and effectiveness" (49). The relationship to power in these cultures is complicated by the fact that gaining power is perceived as alternately positive and dangerous, and "those who seek power or receive it unbidden are supposed to continually purify themselves of any selfish motives and dedicate their actions to the good of the whole" (50). A mixed respect and anxiety about power is reflected then, as the world of spirit is generally recognized as unpredictable territory: "Although everyone is expected to observe certain personal ways of worship,. . . some ways of interacting with spirit are thought best left to those who are specially trained for these roles" (51). These spiritual specialists are, Fisher documents, initiated "into secret knowledge that allows them to act as intermediaries between the seen and the unseen" (51). Among others, these roles include the medium, the priest or priestess, the shaman, and the storyteller or bard (51-54).

Women's powers as spiritual specialists are often recognized in indigenous traditions, Fisher suggests. In many indigenous cultures, women are believed to wield their own brand of natural power, while male spiritual specialists have to "work harder for it," training and preparing more for their roles (50). In many indigenous traditions, women's spiritual power is sometimes perceived as mysterious, uncontrolled or even fearsome—revealing a pervasive anxiety across cultures about gender and power (50). When gender, power, and spirit intersect, then, their relationships may be particularly worthy of discussion.

Morrison and Naylor privilege women as stewards of indigenous values and beliefs, endowing their female characters with spiritual power and favoring a feminist spirituality. Central to both *Beloved* and *Mama Day* are female characters that take on special leadership roles, acting as spiritual specialists for their communities. What is remarkable in examining the sacred leadership roles of these female characters is that they embody the traditional practices and identities of the indigenous traditions, aligning these texts yet again with a re-memory and revaluation of an African spiritual legacy. Morrison and Naylor conflate African-American women's power with that of the ancestral spiritual traditions, re-examining the possibilities of women's power and offering an ideological vision for individual and communal healing in the present and future. In these two novels, Morrison and Naylor designate women as vital sacred leaders, thereby exploring and valuing female spiritual power in all its potentials. Images of women spiritually alive and powerful support a feminist spirituality—one in which the Divine may be called upon for spiritual and creative uses, in which the Divine may be experienced as immanent within women, here in this world, and in which women take

part in a spiritual community that recognizes their power, value, and dignity.

### **The Female Medium in *Beloved***

As Jeanne Reesman notes, throughout history women in non-Anglo/European communities “have commanded both respect and fear as priestesses, witches, shamans and curanderas, as they celebrate the idea that this world and the next are connected, that there is harmony between the physical and the spiritual” (838). The prominence of the spirit world in *Beloved* and the ghost’s embodiment in physical, human, form sets the stage for women’s leadership as mediums. These female mediums have special powers to contact the spirit world and to use their wisdom in the aims of both personal and communal consciousness and healing.

As William Handley’s scholarship details, the African principle *muntu* refers to human beings, both living and dead, who exercise the power of the word in bringing things to life. He notes that this way of looking at the world, which normalizes and empowers the leadership role of the medium, is markedly different from Western thought, with its comfort in a perceived distance between the living and the dead, the figural and the real (677). Fisher has documented that in West Africa there are mediums closely associated with the temples who enter a state of trance or invite spirit possession, frequently as a means of bringing some message to the community (53). In these traditions, the ancestors, a grouping which includes family members from centuries past as well as the recently deceased, may act as mediators between human beings and the High God. Devotees, who actively serve alongside priests, complete an initiation that involves a symbolic “death,” followed by instruction in the sacred rites and a mysterious language, and finally a symbolic “resurrection”. Devotees, as Albert Raboteau details,

“have become mediums of their gods and . . . may become possessed . . . in states of ecstatic ‘trance’ described as ‘spirit possession.’ . . . They become for a time the god’s mouthpiece” (10).

The world of spirits, in West African religion, is extensive, complex, and inherently accessible to human beings. Raboteau’s study describes the most powerful class of spirits in West African tradition, the ancestors:

It is believed that, as custodians of custom and law, the ancestors have the power to intervene in present affairs. . . A person neglects the veneration of his ancestors at the risk of sickness, misfortune, even death. It is commonly held that ancestors are born again in their descendants. (12)

While discussing *Beloved* in an interview for British television, Toni Morrison discussed the African belief that the dead are sometimes reborn in children who “retain their memories and visions” (Handley 689). Due to the power of ancestral spirits in these communities, burial rites take on the highest importance. Funeral ceremonies which are incomplete or improper delay or impede the transition into the afterlife, and, as Raboteau, notes, “may cause his or her soul to linger about as a restless and malevolent ghost”—thus, the significance of extensive and ritualized mourning (13). When burial and mourning customs have been properly observed, spirits are believed to avoid bringing trouble to the living.

*Beloved* is of course a ghost story, the tale of the dead returned to haunt the living. The story comes complete with a haunted house, strange lights, scents, and sounds, and an animal that can sense the presence of the supernatural. We know of the shattering

mirrors, the tiny handprints appearing in the cake, the kettleful of chickpeas on the floor, “the outrageous behavior of that place . . . turned-over slop jars, smacks on the behind, and gusts of sour air” (3,4). The ghost has uncanny strength, otherworldly features, mysterious knowledge and unexplainable powers. She generally wreaks havoc on 124 Bluestone Road, and on the days and nights of the living.

The women in this novel are acutely attuned to the spirit world, and repeatedly take on the role of the medium. Sethe and Denver live intimately with the spirit of the dead, “For they understood the source of the outrage as well as they knew the source of light,” and Sethe knows that “nothing ever dies” (4, 36). Denver has called up the spirit of Beloved with her own longings “Denver’s imagination produced its own hunger and its own food” (28). After the ancestor-child Beloved comes to 124 in human form, Denver again connects with the ghost on a spiritual plane. When Beloved gazes at Denver, it is

lovely, not to be stared at, not seen, but being pulled into view. . .

Denver’s skin dissolved under that gaze and became soft and bright like the lisle dress that had its arm around her mother’s waist. She floated near but outside her own body, feeling vague and intense at the same time. (118)

Denver acts as a medium for Baby Suggs’ spirit after her grandmother’s death, contacting her for knowledge and strength to leave the house: “Denver stood on the porch in the sun and couldn’t leave it. Her throat itched; her heart kicked—and then Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything. . . . There ain’t [no defense]. . . . Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on” (244).

Mother and daughter join together as mediums to contact the ghost of the

crawling-already? girl:

Sethe and Denver decided to end the persecution by calling forth the ghost that tried them so. Perhaps a conversation, they thought, and exchange of views or something would help. So they held hands and said, "Come on. Come on. You may as well just come on." (4)

Sethe's intimate contact with the dead extends beyond the ghost of Beloved, and is seen also in her post-mortem communication with Baby Suggs, when she encounters her in the clearing. Sethe returns to the clearing "to get a clue from her husband's dead mother as to what she should do with her sword and shield now" (89). She contacts the spirit of her mother-in-law, bringing about a physical manifestation, taking on the role of the medium:

Just the fingers, she thought. Just let me feel your fingers again on the back of my neck and I will lay it all down, make a way out of this no way. Sethe bowed her head and sure enough—they were there. Lighter now, no more than the strokes of a bird feather, but unmistakably caressing fingers. . . . Baby Suggs' long-distance love was equal to any skin-close love she had known (95).

When Sethe prays, she is accompanied by the spirit of the dead; and the line between the two entities, the living and the ghost, become blurred as they merge in spiritual communication:

A dim glow came from Baby Suggs' room. When Denver looked in, she saw her mother on her knees in prayer, which was not unusual. What was unusual (even for a girl who had lived all her

life in a house peopled by the living activity of the dead) was that a white dress knelt down next to her mother and had its sleeve around her mother's waist. . . . The dress and her mother together looked like two friendly grown-up women—one (the dress) helping out the other. (29)

The house itself, feminized by the dominant presence of its women, also acts as a medium: "124 was spiteful . . . Full of a baby's venom" (3). The house, as a kind of female medium, comes to life, animated by the spirit of the dead:

Denver approached the house, regarding it, as she always did, as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits. Her steps and her gaze were the cautious ones of a child approaching a nervous, idle relative (someone dependent but proud). (19)

The women of Sethe's community join together to confront the spirit world head-on, with power, conviction, and efficacy. We know that Ella, when hearing of Sethe's fleshly haunting at 124, says "she didn't mind a little communication between the worlds, but this was an invasion" (257). She organizes the women to go to Sethe's house and directly make contact with the spirit in an ecstatic gesture bridging the world of the living and the dead:

A woman dropped to her knees. Half of the others did likewise. Denver saw lowered heads, but could not hear the lead prayer—only the earnest syllables of agreement that backed it: Yes, yes, yes, oh yes. Hear me. Hear me. . . . Among those not on their



knees, who stood holding 124 in a fixed glare, was Ella, trying to see through the walls, behind the door, to what was really in there. . .and then Ella holllered. Instantly the kneelers and the standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like. . . The singing women recognized Sethe at once and surprised themselves by their absence of fear when they saw what stood next to her. (258-59, 261)

Morrison assigns this spiritual power of mediumship specifically to women— after all, we know that despite Paul D’s passionate and violent attempts to eradicate Beloved, the spirit of the dead not only remains outside his communicative abilities, but rather continues to control *him*, seducing him sexually and moving him out of the house at will (18,114, 117). When we read the lines “It took a man, Paul D, to shout it off, beat it off and take its place for himself,” we know the irony, the prematurity, of the pronouncement (104). The other men associated with 124 Bluestone Road are also estranged from contact with the spirit world, fearful of the ghost and controlled by their reticence to encounter it. Sethe’s two sons are literally driven away in fear of the spirit in the house. We are told that “they had known, but it scared them” (37). The novel opens with the narrator detailing Howard and Buglar’s disengagement from communication with the spirit world:

The sons . . . had run away by the time they were thirteen years old —as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the

cake (that was it for Howard). Neither boy waited to see more. . . .  
Nor did they wait for one of the relief periods. . . . No. Each one  
fled at once—the moment the house committed what was for him  
the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time. (3)

Stamp Paid, who attempts to visit 124 Bluestone Road out of regret for revealing Sethe's  
past to Paul D, is distanced from the spirit of the dead, unable to enter the house and  
aware of a distinctly female activity existing outside his comprehension or control:

What he heard, as he moved toward the porch, he didn't  
understand. Out on Bluestone Road he thought he heard a  
conflagration of hasty voices—loud, urgent, all speaking at once so  
he could not make out what they were talking about or to who  
whom. . . . Something was wrong with the order of the words and  
he couldn't describe or cipher it to save his life. All he could make  
out was the word *mine*. The rest of it stayed outside his mind's  
reach. . . . When he got to the steps it gave him pause. They had  
become an occasional mutter—like the interior sounds a woman  
makes when she believes she is alone and unobserved at her work.  
. . . Nothing fierce or startling. Just that eternal, private  
conversation that takes place between women and their tasks.  
Stamp Paid raised his fist to knock on the door . . . and he could  
not do it. . . . Over and over again he tried it . . . and stopped, trying  
to figure out what to do at the door. . . . But the coldness of the  
gesture—its sign that he was indeed a stranger at the gate—

overwhelmed him (172-73).

In accordance with African belief about the dead, the ghost of Beloved is linked to the collective history of slavery, to the memories of the Middle Passage dead, and to the survivors. As Baby Suggs recognizes, “death was anything but forgetfulness” (4). We know that in the world of the novel, as in the American historical landscape, slavery has left its ugly mark on the dead and the living, who remain in intimate contact with one another:

“Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief,” says Baby Suggs. “We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband’s spirit was to come back in here? or yours? . . . You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. . . . I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody’s house into evil.” (5)

We know from the text that this haunting has everything to do with the ghost of collective history and collective memory: “The secret spread of this new kind of whitefolks’ jungle was hidden, silent, except once in a while when you could hear its mumbling in places like 124” (199). It is here that the medium’s function of using her contact with the spirit world to gain wisdom and bring a message to the people comes to bear; The ghost of Beloved, as a representative of the past, of the “ancestor” spirit world, connects Sethe to and helps her come to grips with both the collective history and its manifestations in her own personal history, a history which she has struggled to leave untold and unremembered. Beloved has a thirst for stories from the past, and Sethe begins to heal in

the remembering, the telling: “She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable. . . . But as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it” (58). To integrate, to remember, to give a voice to the history, but not to be shackled by its lingering—this is the difficult lesson of the ghost of Beloved, learned by Sethe when she makes herself intimate with the dead.

African teachings address the behavior of the improperly mourned and buried, the restless spirit who haunts. Sethe wonders, “Who would have thought a little old baby could harbor so much rage?,” and women in the black community, such as Ella, know that “people who die bad don’t stay in the ground” (5, 188). It is the improper tending of the past, symbolized by the dead, that Sethe must gain wisdom from through her role as a medium. Beloved’s burial and her grave markings are, as West African belief warns against, unseemly—she is buried in a scantily marked grave, bought with ten minutes of sex. Because of her imprisonment and the circumstances surrounding the death, Sethe has not been able to grieve and bury her daughter in a traditional fashion. Sethe’s voice in the novel tells her dead daughter of the pain surrounding the burial:

When I put that headstone up I wanted to lay in there with you, put your head on my shoulder and keep you warm, and I would have if Buglar and Howard and Denver didn’t need me, because my mind was homeless then. I couldn’t lay down with you then. No matter how much I wanted to. I couldn’t lay down nowhere in peace, back then. (104)

Sethe, in this novel, embarks on a spiritual journey of re-memory at many levels – personal, historical, and cultural. The Sethe that we know early in the novel has not yet

properly buried her dead, literally and metaphorically. The “circle of iron,” connoting a personal and a cultural history of degradation and loss, chokes Sethe’s neck (101).

Because of Beloved’s unsettled, unnatural death (symbolizing the African-American experience of the Middle Passage and slavery), because Sethe is haunted by her past to an extent that she allows it to dominate her present and future, and because she has not made peace with her community, Beloved brings trouble to the living:

The mood changed and the arguments began. . . . When once or twice Sethe tried to assert herself, . . . Beloved slammed things, wiped the table clean of plates, threw salt on the floor, broke a windowpane. She was not like them. She was wild game. . . . Sethe confined herself to a corner chair. The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became . . . The news spread among the other coloredwomen. Sethe’s dead daughter, the one whose throat she cut, had come back to fix her. (242, 250, 255)

Sethe journeys beyond the fact that she “didn’t really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused,” and that Beloved, as a representative of the past that becomes domineering and destructive, is more than willing to “help her out” in her spiritual stagnation (252). Sethe journeys toward a relationship with the past that is honest but healing, balanced and fully told, but not allowed to rule absolute. She must learn that thinking “whatever is going on outside my door ain’t for me. The world is this room. This here’s all there is and all their needs to be” is a mistake (183). This spiritual journey is, at heart, a journey of self and community.

Sethe struggles toward spiritual peace through her experiences with the returned

ghost of Beloved, the re-memory and telling of the stories of her past that the ghost precipitates, and her relationship to Denver, Baby Suggs and Paul D. Her contact with the dead is an intensely personal experience but also one that resonates into community. In this way Sethe, as the medium, is a spiritual guide for others. The haunting, in the end, brings Sethe and Paul D into a more full and validating communion with one another, and it brings Sethe back into the social and spiritual fold of the local women, restoring a sense of unity and connection. As a medium contacting the world of the dead, and metaphorically the ancestors of the past, Sethe guides Paul D toward his own spiritual healing. Haunted by his own inner ghosts, the painful memory of the bit in his mouth and the loss of the people his community comprised, Paul D begins to remember and tell his own secrets when he comes to Sethe's house. In his own re-memory and in the confrontation with Sethe's past, her literal and metaphorical ghosts, Paul begins re-opening the tin box that was his heart (116-17, 218). Love and community with Sethe, medium and spiritual guide, acts as his healing elixir:

Suddenly he remembers Sixo trying to describe what he felt about the Thirty-Mile Woman. "She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. *The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order.* It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind." He is staring at the quilt but he is thinking about her wrought-iron back. . . . Her tenderness about his neck jewelry—its three wands, like attentive baby rattlers, curving two feet into the air. How she never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being collared

like a beast. Only this woman Sethe could have left him his  
manhood like that . He wants to put his story next to hers[emphasis  
added]. (272-73)

Paul D, at the novel's end, reiterates to Sethe what he has learned from her, from her own ability and willingness to contact her dead: "Sethe, me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (273).

Sethe's role as medium serves as spiritual guidance for her daughter Denver, as well. When Denver discovers, in watching her mother and the returned child-ghost Beloved, that the past, when allowed to take over the present, can literally and metaphorically eat a person alive, she is pushed to finally go outside the yard and into the community (240). Although Denver has longed for the return of Beloved, and "at first they played together . . . a whole month and Denver loved it," the mood eventually changes and the past becomes dangerous and all-consuming, threatening Sethe and Denver's very existence (240-41). Denver begins to realize, in living with the returned ghost, that "somebody had to be saved," and that "it was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (252). Denver begins to reach out to others, to connect in ways she never has before (243-255). Sethe has unknowingly been a spiritual guide in her contact with the dead, teaching Denver about the delicate balance of past, present, and future, of spiritual wholeness and re-memory. By the end of the novel, Denver has left behind her lonely and singular longing for the unnatural playmate of an obsessively vengeful past. As Paul D recognizes, she's "grown," and as Denver says of opinions, "I have my own" (267).

Sethe's leadership role as a medium also resonates in the larger community. As

Fisher has documented, in African indigenous belief, “the spirits are available to reverent seekers as helpers, as intermediaries between the people and power” (45). The teachings of spirits “may come in frightening forms which test one’s faith and courage,” and are received by mediums, “sincere seekers [who] respect, silently listen for and learn from them, purifying themselves in order to engage the services of spirits for the good of the people” (45). In addition, in the Yoruba tradition of West Africa, “teachings about the spirits help the people to understand how they should live together in society”—thus the power of the medium in fostering community cohesion and healing (45). The “coloredwomen” and Stamp Paid are haunted by the past and by communal fragmentation associated with the women of 124 Bluestone Road. Through Sethe’s experiences as a medium in intimate contact with the dead, the women and Stamp Paid move toward healing and community rejuvenation. The women and Sethe have been disconnected since Baby Suggs’ party and the killing of the baby in the shed: “Just about everybody in town was longing for Sethe to come on difficult times” (171). We know that the women, envious and spiteful after Baby Suggs’ bountiful party, make no effort to warn the women of 124 Bluestone Road when Schoolteacher and his men come to take Sethe back into slavery, and they judge Sethe harshly for her acts of self-determination and will (157, 256). The text suggests that the women’s turning against Baby Suggs and her family stems from the fact that the experiences of slavery are still poisoning their minds, distorting their intimacies and dividing them from their own—the women suddenly, and mistakenly, view Baby Suggs as a pampered soul who has been spared the horrors of slavery, lording her pride over them. As a consequence, “Baby Suggs, holy, having devoted her freed life to harmony, was buried amid a regular dance



of pride, fear, condemnation, and spite” (137, 171). Sethe’s contact as a medium with the spirit of Beloved eventually brings the women back into community with the women of 124, as they seek to help Sethe and reclaim her into the spiritual fold. In this journey to 124, the women also journey spiritually, making peace at last with Baby Suggs and with their own hearts; the narrator suggests that the ghost of Baby Suggs laughs and moves among the women as they walk to 124 in aid of Sethe, and that the “envy” of Baby Suggs is gone from their hearts and minds at last (258). A lesson for others has once again been recognized and transmitted through Sethe’s role as the medium.

As Barbara Hill Rigney recognizes,

History, for Morrison and for the characters, is the reality of slavery. . . Morrison’s historic world is so unnatural, so horrific and brutal, that the only “natural” element is the supernatural . . . and it represents, finally, the ultimate Black revolution against slavery: the insistence on the link with Africa, the insistence on a myth beyond history. (229)

Rigney has identified a key element of the message that Sethe as medium brings to her community—the need to revalue and re-memory a past before slavery, a full humanity, a Black community that comes to grips with but can also transcend, in some sense, slavery’s horrors. The re-memory of a link with Africa is configured in the text by allocating power to the traditionally African role of the medium, which in turn serves to validate ancestral belief systems concerning life, death, memory and history. The female medium functions here as a marker of female power and spiritual worth, and as a beacon for the future of African-American community. By assigning them the power of the

medium, Morrison gives women a spiritual and cultural vitality, an importance that makes them central to spiritual life and to communal survival. Morrison here again suggests a hope for the future of African-American women and men alike in the preservation of empowering roles, belief systems and values that foster a healthy and united community. Women's spiritual power is here revalued and re-configured as not "dangerous" and "uncontrolled," but creative and healing. Rather than being unreachable and "mysterious," as the indigenous African traditions sometimes viewed it, women's spiritual leadership in *Beloved* uses the ancient beliefs in an accessible and positive way. Morrison envisions women as important guides in the path to a spiritual wholeness—a spirituality that is accessible, validates individual experience, and gives strength to the communal life.

### **Baby Suggs, Priestess**

Fisher notes that in some of the more socially stratified indigenous cultures, including several of those originating in West Africa, the priest or priestess carries out rituals "that ensure proper functioning of the natural world" (53). These individuals are sometimes specially trained, sometimes not, but are always dedicated to maintaining a state of spiritual purity (53). Although they often have other occupations and responsibilities in the community in addition to their spiritual leadership duties, the priests and priestesses are expected to spend much of their time in communication with the spirit world and to the powers of the deity, seeking a Divine guidance for the lives of the people (53). Part of the role of the priestess is bringing messages of Divine meaning and instructions for spiritual wholeness to her followers.

Baby Suggs, in line with a feminist spirituality, is at once an enormously

powerful spiritual leader and also a fully human being with frailties of her own. Her humanity, which eventually leads Baby Suggs to take to her bed in despondency, having endured all the suffering and loss she can take, does not lessen her power as a communal priestess. In fact, Morrison's ideology of feminist spirituality, so pervasive in this novel, sees no conflict between the humanity of Baby Suggs and her great spiritual power; Baby Suggs shares a spirituality that is imminent in human life, accessible, and relevant to lived experience. The spiritual legacy of Baby Suggs' leadership lives on even after her death—her words, actions, and spiritual values are remembered by Denver, Sethe, and an entire community, and continue to affect their lives, guiding and rejoining them in healing and love even after she is gone. As Sharon Jessee has argued, "that no one is invincible in the novel is perhaps the illumination that takes us through the ending and back to the beginning. This is a story of survivors who need the communal sharing and mutual respect of their selves in order to 'leap' away from slavery and have any kind of future, things that are only beginning to be realized, and tentatively so, by the end of the novel" (209).

What Baby Suggs recognizes is a great spiritual truth for Sethe and for the wider community: The truth that the battleground is not always where healing and spiritual peace is to be found. Long after Baby Suggs' death, Sethe remembers those teachings:

She wished for Baby Suggs' fingers molding her nape, reshaping it,  
saying "Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down.

Both of em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't  
study war no more. Lay all that mess down. Sword and shield."

And under the pressing fingers and the quiet instructive voice, she

would. (86)

As Baby Suggs comes to realize, and subsequently is able to share with Sethe, “There’s more of us they drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time. Lay down your sword. This ain’t a battle; it’s a rout” (244).

Baby Suggs takes on the role of the priestess as a spiritual response to an unreconcilable social and cultural landscape that had broken her, and her people: “Baby Suggs had ‘decided that, because slave life had ‘busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,’ she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart – which she put to work at once” (87). When she adopts this role of spiritual leadership, in her early days at 124 Bluestone road, Baby Suggs’ heart and home become communal centers for wholeness and healing, teaching spiritual values:

Before 124 and everybody in it had closed down, veiled over and shut away . . . 124 had been a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed. Where not one but two pots simmered on the stove; where the lamp burned all night long. . . . Talk was low and to the point—for Baby Suggs, holy, didn’t approve of extra. “Everything depends on knowing how much,” she said, and “Good is knowing when to stop.” (87)

Baby Suggs, who leads her people in spontaneous worship and teaches them to love themselves, body, heart and soul, is formally recognized by her community as a spiritual leader, although her power remains accessible, nondogmatic and nonhierarchical:

“Accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, she

became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it. . . . Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence” (87).

Baby Suggs, priestess, calls upon the spiritual realm, the powers of the Divine, for inspiration in her leadership role, ready to share what she intuitively with others: “After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from the trees. They knew she was ready when she put her stick down” (87). The spiritual truths Baby Suggs gives in her homilies in the Clearing are those that serve the lived realities of African-American people who are still living in the shadow of slavery—the teachings make sense to the real lives of these individuals and offer them spiritual healing:

She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. . . . Love your heart. For this is the prize. (88-9)

Baby Suggs teaches her granddaughter, Denver, these same spiritual truths:

Grandma Baby said people look down on her because she had eight children with different men. . . . Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings of their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them. Still, they were not supposed to have

pleasure deep down. She said for me not to listen to all that. That I  
should always listen to my body and love it. (209)

Inherently aware of and connected to the powers of personal and communal myth and to the spirit world, Denver comes to recognize that Baby Suggs has given her a valuable spiritual education: “She told me all my daddy’s things. . . . She told me my things too. That I was charmed. My birth was and I got saved all the time” (209). Baby Suggs has shared Afrocentric spiritual belief with Denver in confronting the presence of spirits and ancestors, as well:

That I shouldn’t be afraid of the ghost. It wouldn’t harm me  
because I tasted its blood when Ma’am nursed me. She said the  
ghost was after Ma’am and her too for not doing anything to stop  
it. But it would never hurt me. I just had to watch out for it  
because it was a greedy ghost and needed a lot of love, which was  
only natural, considering. (209)

Her followers, women *and* men, as well as their children who represent the new life, connect to Baby Suggs’ brand of Black feminist spirituality: “With Baby Suggs’ heart in charge, the people let go” (94). Although Baby Suggs, in her humility, says “she always wished she could read the Bible like real preachers,” her earthiness speaks to her accessibility and spontaneity as a priestess, not her inadequacy (208). People respond intuitively to “her authority in the pulpit, her dance in the clearing, her powerful Call,” because she offers them spiritual sustenance that is deeply rooted in physical reality (177). Baby Suggs “didn’t deliver sermons or preach—insisting she was too ignorant for that,” but “she *called* and the hearing heard” (177). Baby Suggs, who preaches at

churches of all denominations and in the natural world, wherever she is welcomed, does not need special training or the validation of a religious hierarchy to reach the people with her own good news; and this is her special power. She preaches because she has chosen to preach, and her act of self-will in taking on the responsibilities of spiritual leadership is important a guidepost for others in the community who are reclaiming *themselves*. Although when she quits preaching Stamp Paid maintains that “The Word had been given to her” and that she must go on, insisting that she has been ordained somehow and “had to speak it,” Baby Suggs makes her own rules (178). Even in her disillusionment, in this act she remains a powerful spiritual leader, offering by her very human example a lesson for others—that we must know and own ourselves, our own bodies, our own hearts. Her sadness and her loss offer to Stamp and the rest of the community, when they are ready to listen, yet another spiritual lesson and a model for the future: “To belong to a community of other free negroes—to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed—and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance—well it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy” (177). The love and shelter of community, built on the foundation of loving and valuing the individual *self*, represents Baby Suggs’ lasting legacy as a spiritual leader.

### **The Female Shaman in *Mama Day***

According to Fisher’s scholarship, shamans represent the most distinctive form of spiritual leadership among indigenous peoples. Archaeological research suggests that shamanic methods are ancient, at least 20-30 thousand years old (53). The name “shaman” is assigned in its most generic sense by scholars to represent “those who offer

themselves as mystical intermediaries between the physical and the non-physical world for specific purposes, such as healing,” and the practice of shamanic arts, Fisher says, is similar across indigenous cultures from various parts of the world (53).

The shaman undergoes a mysterious initiation, focusing on death and rebirth, and in the shamanic role uses purification, isolation, and/or physical rituals to contact the spiritual plane (55). The spirit world then offers guidance, clarity, spiritual sustenance, and “secrets and myths of the tribe” to the shaman, who in turn is able to share these gifts in aiding others and to pass on the knowledge to new generations of shamans (55). The shaman has the ability “to enter parallel spiritual realities at will in order to bring back knowledge, power or help” (55).

Fisher distinguishes shamans from sorcerers, who practice black magic against others to promote their own interests only, or seek to do harm. Indigenous cultures that recognize the shaman, such as many in Africa, believe that spiritual power in itself remains neutral, and that its use depends upon the practitioner’s intention (53). The shaman is typically a societal helper, using skills to benefit the community (53).

Shamans, including those in indigenous African traditions, are known for their special gifts, such as talking with plants and animals, controlling the weather, seeing and communicating with the spirit world, and prophesying (54). One of the most important tasks of the shaman is healing. One type of shamanic medicine focuses on healing physical, psychological and spiritual problems of community members, wherein the “patient” is treated holistically (54). Body, mind, and spirit are viewed as integrally related in shamanic healing. Not only are physical approaches, such as the use of herbs, the release of toxins, massage, and dietary modifications used by shamans, but they are



integrated with metaphysical divination, prayer, chanting, ceremonies in which the power of the group is harnessed, and the use of special helpers (54). As Fisher notes, if the hostility of another person is a source of the illness, the shaman may enlist the aid of spirit helpers to alleviate the negative influence (54).

Kathleen Puhr has commented that the healers in all of Naylor's fiction tend to connote the "practices of Africa," as they "heal heart and soul, as well as body" (518). Certainly I agree, and wish to expand on the idea that Mama Day is known throughout Willow Springs as a great healer of interconnected minds, bodies, and spirits, and she is associated with an African past. Naylor configures Mama Day as an indigenous African shaman in female form, who in this role leads her community into the future using the traditions and values of an ancient legacy.

Shamanism, as I've defined it here, is somewhat aligned with the roles and powers of the medium. In *Beloved*, the medium's contact with the dead functions as a tool for personal spiritual healing as well as communal healing. The shaman is more explicitly, by definition, tied to communal service and guidance based on knowledge gained from the spiritual plane and the ancestors. The shamanistic role, although it includes powers of the medium such as contact with the spirit world, is additionally and more explicitly aligned with powers such as healing, prophesy, and communication with the natural world of plants and animals.

Lindsey Tucker has published an exceptional essay on conjure in *Mama Day*, suggesting that Naylor brings the image of the conjure woman out of "the margins of folklore and ethnography" (173). Just as some attributes are shared in common between the medium and the shaman, there is also some overlap in discussing the characteristics

of a “conjure woman” versus a shaman, because the two identity roles share some markers. According to the parameters Tucker has set out for defining conjure, the conjure woman is associated with healing and/or magic, she commands power in her community, and she is said to have psychic abilities. Each of these characteristics is also associated with the shaman. There are distinctions, however, hold some significance. Some conjurers use natural practices and elements to cure, while others use spells and charms, and some use a combination of these (177). Conjure women, as Tucker argues it, alternately treat natural illnesses using roots and herbs, or “spiritually connected” illnesses using spell casting and charms (178). Tucker argues that *Mama Day* primarily represents the first category of conjure woman, the one associated with the practice of herbal medicine (178). Tucker’s discussion of conjure represents a vital part of the scholarly dialogue on spirituality in *Mama Day*, particularly in that it seeks to examine the ways in which Naylor is invested in privileging indigenous traditions and women’s spiritual power. I also want to formally recognize the commonalities between the conjure role and the shamanistic role, but seek to explore *Mama Day*’s spiritual leadership role from a new angle. The indigenous shaman represents a spiritual leadership role which has not yet been explored in published scholarship on this novel. An exploration of the shamanic role is necessary in addition to Tucker’s scholarship on conjure, despite the overlap in attributes, because of the unique representation of the shaman—designated in mythology and indigenous practice as one who contacts the spiritual plane in order to relay the “secrets and myths of the tribe” to the community, entering “parallel spiritual realities at will in order to bring back knowledge, power or help” (Fisher 55). This explicit role distinguishes the shaman somewhat from the conjure woman. The

connection to communal healing and solidarity seems a markedly important aspect of the shaman's role, with the shaman being understood more explicitly as a *communal* guide and servant-leader than is perhaps the conjure woman. Other attributes that specifically mark the shaman's role are a more explicitly holistic aim at integrating mind, body, and spirit, special connection to nature through communication with plants and animals, communication with the spirit world of the dead, prophesy, a special initiation, and an association with solitude for spiritual purposes.

Mama Day, as a shaman figure, accesses the spiritual plane in order to guide her people, bringing back "knowledge, power and help" (Fisher 55). As Naylor has said of the healers in her work, "what they . . . share is . . . a spiritual strength and a sense of female communion that all women have employed historically for their psychic health and survival" (Puhr 526). Mama Day's shamanic leadership plays a major part in solidifying the novel's dominant ideology of feminist spirituality, privileging female power and women's efficacy in preserving the values of an African spiritual tradition.

Mama Day carries on Sapphira Wade's legacy of magic and healing associated with a lost Africa (5). Sapphira, the myth goes, could harness lightning "to start the kindling going under her medicine pot," could "turn the moon into salve and the stars into a swaddling cloth," healing "the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four" (3). Sapphira, as an ancestral shamanic figure, calls up the storm that comes to Willow Springs near the end of the novel, bringing the community together to grieve, to heal, and to rebuild. Mama Day's role as a healer is inherited, a spiritual and cultural legacy. She works in an "old garden," "a garden designed by a woman" (225). Her garden, kettles, medicines and herbs "may have been hers, but they hung on hooks

that were rusted and ancient. . . . [She] was not the first to use them” (225). In the image of the matriarchal healer Sapphira, Mama Day lives out African spiritual values in her everyday actions, demonstrating a spiritual power that is accessible and immanent, a spirituality existing alongside and connected to social realism. Just as the community hears and remembers the myth of Sapphira “sitting on porches and shelling June peas, quieting the midnight cough of a baby, taking apart the engine of a car . . . heard it without a single living soul really saying a word,” so do they experience Mama Day’s shamanic powers as a spiritual leader (10). The spiritual plane that Mama Day, as a shamanic leader, accesses to bring wisdom and healing to her people is aligned with feminist spirituality in that it is imminent within her, connected to the natural world, accessible and available for creative and spiritual uses. The everyday realities of folk in Willow Springs, then, are infused with Mama Day’s influence and guidance as a shamanic spiritual guide. The “magical” and “spiritual” become infused and conflated with the “real” and the “common.”

Mama Day’s spiritual initiation as a shamanic leader comes in her childhood and is intimately connected to nature and its cycles, mirroring the mystic shamanic initiation of death and rebirth. Nature is “her playground” as a young girl, she lives in harmony with the elements of twigs, trees, and rocks, and we are told that in her childhood, “folks started believing John-Paul’s little girl became a spirit in the woods” (79). We know that later in life, nature will be a temple and a symbol for Mama Day’s contacting the spiritual plane: “The night air will do that, Miranda thinks, it’ll make so many things clear” (91). Mama Day’s initiation into the shamanic leadership role is precipitated in her childhood by the death of her infant sister and the spiritual and psychological

decline, and eventual death, of Mama Day's mother. These losses and deaths have, the text suggests, greatly impacted Mama Day's life and her role in the community. Her losses spark her own painful rebirth as a person separated from the love and care of her mother and as a caretaker and lifegiving healer of others. Her father's "Little Mama," she had "no time to be young" (88). As a child, she took over all the responsibilities and tasks for "the woman who sat in the porch rocker, twisting, twisting on pieces of thread" (88). As a child suffering the losses associated with the spiritual, physical and psychological deaths of her mother and sister, Mama Day is painfully reborn as the shaman: "Being there for mama and child, for sister and child. Being there to catch so many babies that dropped into her hands. Gifted hands, folks said. You have a gift, Little Mama. . . . It ain't fair that it came with a high price, but it did" (89).

Mama Day, as a shamanic figure who is characterized by isolation for spiritual purposes, lives alone in her silver trailer, isolated although within easy enough reach of her sister and those in the community who need her (9). She has never married, has never had children and for the most part spends her outings at the other place, gardening and working with her herbs, in solitude. We are told that, except for her family intimates, most people who come to Mama Day looking for wisdom, knowledge or healing, approach her trailer respectfully, waiting for her to beckon them closer. Had Reema's son been tuned in enough to the people of Willow Springs and their cultural ways to go straight to Mama Day's, as the narrator suggests he should have, "he'd know when he got to that silver trailer to stand back a distance calling Mama, Mama Day, to wait for her to come out and beckon him near. . . . More likely than not, [she would] let him in" (9).

Mama Day's feminist spirituality leads her to recognize a spiritual and physical connection to the natural world, and her relationship to it is connected to her special, magico-intuitive and down-to-earth prophesy and her ability to communicate with nature. She predicts Cocoa's arrival by reading the vapor beads on apricot leaves in the morning sun: "Miranda smiles as the bead of water turns golden in color – my, what a pleasant surprise. She must ring up Abigail and tell her Baby Girl is coming in today, a little earlier than expected—and on the airplane to boot" (34). Miranda predicts the weather by tapping into her physical self: "Her arthritis had told her it was gonna be a dampish kind of day long before she shades her eyes and spots the camel-backed clouds forming on the horizon" (34). In divining how to guide Bernice through her longings for motherhood, Mama Day connects to an intuitive, spiritual plane by reading natural signs:

Real careful, she breaks a fresh egg. . . . Cupping the shell in her hand, she watches for a while as the bloated yellow swims in the thick mucous—not this month. She breaks another egg—nor the next. She third yolk is slipped into the sugar and butter—nor the next. She shakes her head. But she would still make up the ground raspberry for Bernice—tones the insides, strengthens the blood.

(44)

Mama Day's particular kind of communication with the spiritual plane makes for a unique form of psychic power and shamanic prophesy. Her brand of prophesy, which the inhabitants of Willow Springs understand as her "second sight," arises inherently from her ability to interpret natural and material signs, and is infused with a common-sense quality. When developers come to Willow Springs wanting to buy up land, the

inhabitants know “to send ‘em straight over there to her,” and “Mama Day told em” how it would be (6). Mama Day urges the people against selling the land, and “if Mama Day say no, everybody say no. There’s 18 & 23, and there’s 18 & 23—and nobody was gonna trifle with Mama Day’s, cause she knew how to use it” (6). In guiding her people to decide to preserve their property, Mama Day has merely tapped into a social realism, examining the past of her community and others like it to bring a message of guidance to the people:

The Sound with all their lies about “community uplift” and “better jobs” . . . . It weren’t about no them now and us later—was them now and us never. Hadn’t we seen it happen back in the ‘80s on St. Helena, Daufuksie, and St. John’s? And before that in the ‘60s on Hilton Head? Got them folks’ land, built fences around it first thing, and then brought in all the builders, and high-paid managers from mainside. . . . And the only dark faces you see now in them “vacation paradises” is the ones cleaning the toilets and cutting the grass. On their own land, mind you. (6)

The special knowledge to make decisions that affect the spiritual, social, economic, and cultural survival of the people of Willow Springs is, the text suggests, on many levels common-sense and accessibly intuitive, available to all who “know how to use it”—and Mama Day is part of an ancestral line of women who tap into this ability (6).

Her awareness of nature and attunement to the physical body play a significant part in Mama Day’s psychic abilities and her shamanic prophesy for her community. When watching talk show television in an effort to understand better the urban world that

surrounds Cocoa in New York and which threatens to encroach upon Willow Springs, Mama Day “can pick out which ladies in the audience have secretly given up their babies for adoption, which fathers have daughters making pornographic movies, exactly which homes been shattered by Vietnam, drugs or the ‘alarming rise of divorce’” (38). She divines people’s inner selves, their secrets, by reading their physical bodies:

She wants them faces. . . . Sometimes, she’ll keep the volume turned off for the entire hour, knowing well that what’s being said by the audience don’t matter a whit to how it’s being said. Laughter before or after a mouth opens to speak, the number of times a throat swallows, the curve of the lips, the thrust of the neck, the slump of the shoulders. And always, always the eyes. (38)

Mama Day passes this “second sight” on to Cocoa, the “only one left alive in this last generation to keep the Days going,” who argues that “second sight had nothing to do with it,” because she merely understands the patterns of changing seasons that affect the weather and people’s behavior likewise (39, 14).

In the novel we witness two major acts of Mama Day’s power as a shamanic healer—the healing of Bernice and the healing of Cocoa. Bernice’s longing to have a child, her baby’s subsequent birth and his tragic death represent a symbolic cycle. The cycle points ultimately to Bernice’s need to slow down, to gain spiritual peace, to trust nature, to reconnect to the circles of life, death, and rebirth of an ancestral past—and as a shamanic healer, Mama Day plays a significant role in guiding Bernice through this literal and metaphysical journey toward reconciliation. She is a unique helper, in that she recognizes the power and dignity of the individual, even as she shares her own spiritual



power in community. Mama Day knows that ultimately, “Bernice is gonna have to do about Bernice, herself” (45). Mama Day, as a spiritual guide, helps her get there. Thus she seeks to protect Bernice from the hollow, opportunistic spiritual leadership of Dr. Buzzard, who seeks only to take Bernice’s money but has little power to or interest in helping Bernice to heal herself. Mama Day confronts Buzzard, telling him, “If you really had a conscience, you wouldn’t be selling them hoodoo bits of rags and sticks—and that watered-down moonshine as medicine passing yourself off . . . . Your conscience ain’t got nothing to do with it, Buzzard—it’s the money” (51). We know Mama Day’s true power as a shamanic healer when we hear the irony and sarcasm in her chastising of Buzzard: “What could a tired old woman like me do to a powerful hoodoo doctor? Why, that little mess I got out at the other place wouldn’t hold a candle to—. . . .” (51). Even Buzzard recognizes Mama Day’s powers as a true spiritual guide and healer, one invested in using spirit for benevolent and valuable causes. Despite his façade of spiritual leadership for profit, Buzzard knows “how serious this thing is” (287).

Mama Day’s assistance to Bernice integrates the use of the mind, the spirit and the body. Mama Day gives Bernice a list of prescriptions, such as instructions for planting the seeds, intended to distract and relax her mentally (96). She instructs Bernice to plant a seed each time the negativity of others encroaches on her spiritual wellbeing, countering the ill will of others as the healing shaman typically does (115). Mama Day seeks to “give her so much time to use that she won’t have any left over at the end of the day to think about anything but a good night’s sleep, [and] nature’s gonna do the rest” (96). She teaches Bernice that “to wait” and to recognize that “things take time, all in good time,” is an important way of preparing the body and mind for growth

(42). She communes with Bernice on the level of the mind, sharing her healing wisdom and quelling Bernice's hyperactive fears about her husband: "Any man . . . who would leave you just because of something like that is well worth the going. And I've known Ambush before he knew himself . . . and he ain't that kind of man. So if that's what's on your mind, lay it to rest" (43). She prescribes herbal remedies of star grass and teas to help Bernice heal both in body and in mind (43). She also uses magic which is both mystical and associated with the power of the "mind" and "belief" in the fertility rite at the other place (139-40). Mama Day also acts as a healer of the body—we know she is a midwife who has delivered many of Willow Springs' inhabitants and cared for the birthing mothers, that she heals with touch, and that when Bernice becomes ill early in the novel Mama Day diagnoses and treats her physical symptoms.

Mama Day's treatment of Bernice's illness exemplifies her powers as a shamanic healer. Mama Day knows how to read the physical signs of Bernice's body to diagnose the trouble; she distinguishes between different types of fever by "smelling" them, and she deciphers the type of pain and its origins by touch and communication with Bernice, teaching Bernice a new awareness of her own body (72, 73). Mama Day diagnoses what damage has been done to Bernice's body with the stolen fertility pills using both smell and touch (74-76, 83). She knows the healing touch as only the experienced can: "Them wrinkled fingers had gone that way so many times for so many different reasons. A path she knew so well" (75). She integrates the mind and body in treating Bernice, encouraging her to relax, and to "pretend it's something pleasant—like the first time you was with Ambush" (75). Mama Day uses common objects and herbal remedies in treating Bernice, such as lard, baking soda, choke-cherry bark, and peppermint (73, 82,

82). As the shamanic figure, Mama Day also calls upon a special helper in treating Bernice's illness. She sees Bernice's husband, Ambush, as a vital helping force in doing the healing work and uses his help, powerfully generated by his love for his wife, to care for Bernice: "Folks say I can do things most can't do. Whether that's true or not, I can help you if you willing to work with me. . . . I'm gonna need you and Ambush both in the beginning" (87).

An important part of this episode wherein Mama Day treats Bernice's illness is the break she takes in the midst of her work, going outside into the woods to be with nature. For Mama Day, this retreat represents her spiritual rejuvenation, the setting in which she contacts, in some mystical sense, the spiritual plane. This contact with nature allows Mama Day to find the healing choke-cherry tree and cut some off for use to heal Bernice. This symbolic interlude with nature gives Mama Day a spiritual sustenance that positions her as an intermediary between the physical and nonphysical world for healing. When Mama Day takes a break from Bernice's house and the scene of her treatment, she "kinda blooms," watching the evening light, breathing the air, and associating all that she sees with "God" and "living prayer" (78). She returns to the house spiritually revived and ready to take the next step to treat Bernice, suggesting the magical "other place" as a possibility for future healing. Mama Day, in her spiritual communion with nature, has been spiritually restored and can share that in healing others.

Mama Day's shamanic encounter with the spiritual realm when she goes into the woods alone after Candle Walk offers her the beginning insights she will need to heal Cocoa. Like her encounter with nature while healing Bernice, here again Mama Day encounters spiritual consciousness surrounded by trees. This journey is associated with a

kind of physical torment, which indigenous shamans often endure as a way of heightening the senses and eliciting an ecstatic euphoria, bringing them closer to the spirit world (Fisher 55). When Mama Day takes her respite in nature while healing Bernice, she is scratched up by the trees, which leads her to remember her father's words about living in communion rather than opposition with the island (78). Here again, after Candle Walk, Mama Day's journey into the nature, and therefore into the spiritual plane of consciousness, is associated with a kind of physical testing and endurance:

She heads on toward the other place, but her steps are slow and halting. Miranda could walk those west woods stone blind. . .but the light from her candle is playing tricks with the dark. . . She'll go to step over and find she's only stepping on air. . . She wasn't meant to get to the other place tonight. . . . "Let me finish this Candle Walk," thinks Miranda, "cause there's something waiting for me to know." . . . Suddenly she's afraid. An icy ball cramps the middle of her gut . . . her candle flickers out . . . she leans back against a tree in the comforting darkness as the woods she knows begin to take shape. (118)

The fruit of this endurance is Mama Day's contact with the spirit world, with the ancestors, in the stillness and solitude of the woods. In this incident, Mama Day comes to remember her own ancestral stories, which will be keys to passing on a spiritual legacy to Cocoa and to healing her from the hatred of Ruby's hoodoo. What Mama Day remembers about Sapphira gives her knowledge about saving Cocoa—that George can and will play an important role in her salvation, and that the connections with others are

vital to cultural, spiritual, and physical survival:

She tries to listen under the wind. The sound of a long wool skirt passing. Then the tread of heavy leather boots, heading straight for the main road, heading on toward the east bluff over the ocean. . . Miranda's head feels like it's gonna burst. . . . And the humming, humming of some -lost and ancient song. Quiet tears start rolling down Miranda's face. . . the light wasn't for her—it was for him. The tombstone out by Chevy's Pass. How long did he search for her? . . . What had daddy said *his* daddy said about Candle Walk? . . . Listen to the wind from The Sound. Maybe it would come to her. . . . Up and down this path, somehow, a man dies from a broken heart. (118)

Mama Day intuits the damaging hatred of Ruby's "hoodoo" in nature and in listening to her physical self: "Miranda is having the kind of day that's best spent in bed. Everything is determined to go haywire. . . . Edgy. Start the morning with your nerves sticking out all over the place and you're bound to be upsetting whatever you touch all day" (169). Using natural signs and her own physical senses, she senses that Ruby will harm Cocoa: "This was funny, funny weather. It's tightened up her bones so she needed this cane for a lousy two-mile walk, but look how dry the blacktop was. Heavy air that stays just above the knees. That don't bode well. She'd have to really concentrate: look and listen. . . . There's something funny going on" (173-74). Mama Day "was feeling the way she felt just before they got a sudden fall. Overnight the air turning cool and frost killing tomatoes on the vine" (226). A spiritual something "was telling her to listen and

if it just got a little louder, she was willing to listen” (226).

As I have argued earlier in this study, Mama Day uses her spiritual powers to counter the “hoodoo” and hatred of Ruby—an act which once again positions Mama Day in the role of the shamanic healer who uses spiritual power to counteract harmful negativity. In healing Cocoa’s illness, Mama Day also treats the physical body, washing Cocoa’s hair, wrapping her in flannel, and feeding her (265). Finally, she uses what her contacts with the spirit world, as experienced in the woods and at the other place, have revealed to her—that the love of community, represented for Cocoa in George, is necessary for healing, and that a re-memory of an ancestral past can teach us these values, these spiritual lessons. Mama Day has contacted the spirit world through her memory of the past, and she comes to “open her eyes on her own hands . . . hands that look like John-Paul’s. Hands that would not let the woman in gingham go with Peace. Before him, other hands that would not let the woman in apricot homespun go with peace. No, could not let her go” (285). In contacting the spiritual past, she comes to know that she was sent to “feel the hope in them that the work of their hands could wipe away all that had gone before” (285). Mama Day comes to recognize that “it’s gonna take a man to bring [Cocoa] peace,” and uses this knowledge, divined from her re-memory of the familial past, in an attempt to heal Cocoa (263). What Mama Day comes to rely on in healing Cocoa is “a power greater than hate . . . and George” (267). Although George is ultimately unable to fully believe what he *must* in order to save both Cocoa and himself—relying still too heavily on his rationality and self-sufficiency, yet ironically not being ready to access the spiritual potential of his own two hands, the potential “buried in George”—he has set himself, and Cocoa, spiritually free in his dying

(285). Together, Mama Day and George could have been “the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over,” but George is not yet ready to “of his own accord, hand [his will] over to her” (285). George has been unable to see Mama Day’s healing powers, and those of community, as anything other than “mumbo jumbo”; not comprehending Mama Day’s wisdom and power, he calls her “a crazy old woman” (295-96). In crushing the skull of the hen, the symbol of female fertility and rebirth, George refutes Mama Day’s spiritual powers and all the wisdom she has offered him (301). Although he fights it to the end, George must let go, in a way that Bascombe and John-Paul refused their women. Between Mama Day’s powers in physically healing Cocoa, calling in George as helper, and diffusing Ruby’s negative energy, Mama Day heals Cocoa, accessing the spiritual plane of an ancestral past and sharing its wisdom for the good of the community.

#### **“You there, Sister?”: Women’s Leadership & the Implications for Community**

Female leadership in these novels fosters a model for the potentials of the larger community, the African-American community of men and women, the dead, and the living, existing in harmony and connection as is valued in the indigenous spiritual traditions.

The connection of Mama Day to her sister Abigail is intense and intuitively spiritual and extends to their communion with Cocoa as a representative of the future and to Sapphira and the ancestors in the “other place” as representatives of the past. Abigail and Mama Day “didn’t breathe without telling the other what it felt like” (57). These two women, living in communion with one another, present a model of community for the African-American culture, recognizing the strengths of individuals while valuing the larger power of the group in the traditions of indigenous spirituality.

Speaking of her upbringing with Abigail and Mama Day, Cocoa remembers that

Unlike Grandma, [Mama Day] would take a switch to me. Mama Day just didn't believe in cuddling. But if Grandma had raised me alone, I would have been ruined for any fit company. It seemed I could do no wrong with her, while with Mama Day I could do no right. I guess, in a funny kind of way, together they were the perfect mother (58).

We know that even as a young child, Mama Day held the spiritual knowledge of connectedness and community:

She begins to learn even at this age: there is more to be known behind what the eyes can see. So, climbing up on the bed, she shakes the younger child awake. "You there, Sister?" . . .

Miranda's small fingers place themselves around the rhythm of Abigail's breathing. Nested under the quilt, they are four arms and legs, two heads, one heartbeat (36).

Mama Day's relationship with her sister Abigail is an exemplum for a community cohesion that is built and maintained in everyday living, a spiritual union found in common experience:

"You there, Sister?" . . . "Uh, huh." There ain't no other way for Miranda to greet her, or for Abigail to respond. . . . It don't matter when and it don't matter where: Abigail bringing a fresh bunch of collards from across the main road, Miranda sliding into the pew beside her at church, them running into each other at the post



office. (35)

This calling out for recognition and the subsequent confirming response symbolizes the necessary reassurance, in accordance with indigenous African values, that community members maintain unity, connecting at a spiritual level in the midst of every moment.

Although this community-consciousness is kept and nurtured by the novels' female characters, the hope embodied in the re-memory of these indigenous spiritual values is for the larger community—Black men and women seeing themselves as a part of a larger consciousness and connectedness. As Mama Day says to the anguished Bernice, "I'm gonna need you both in the beginning" (87). The communal narrator, one of the three narrators of *Mama Day*, reiterates this value as the novel's core. As Vincent Odamtten has noted, "the voice of Willow Springs, an androgynous spirit, has two assistants (male and female) whose function is to teach their respective group the song (or knowledge) that is the history and heritage of Willow Springs" (124). Susan Meisenhelder has rightly pointed out in her scholarship on the novel that "the rite of passage Mama Day envisions would involve George's recognition that he must become part of a quilt, connected to the past and to both the women and men of Willow Springs," and "the person who is part of the quilt, stitched next to but not absorbed by others, independent but not isolated, connected to but not doomed by history, achieves peace and meaningful freedom from the white world" (416).

Cocoa, like Mama Day, is called to be a steward of this vision of spiritual wholeness and community. She is initiated by her near-death experience, which, as Odamtten has argued, "is necessary to purge her of certain habits of thought which are injurious to her calling as the heir to the legacy of Sapphira Wade and Mama Day, the

new medium between the two worlds that influence Willow Springs” (124). Just as George finds it hard to believe spiritual truths, Cocoa must also come to believe—in community, in the power of love and communion between men and women. Cocoa tells George when she visits his grave, years after their parting, “it’s not that it was hard to believe, I wasn’t ready to believe. Nothing I had met in the world had prepared me for your possibility” (99). We know that although her parents were married, Cocoa’s father had taken off before she was born (106). The prospect of communion with a man is “frightening” to her, and she dreads the day when George’s love “would be over” (119). Mama Day says that “Baby Girl did have something lost to her, but she weren’t gonna find it in no school” (150). The awakening Cocoa needs, and eventually finds, is spiritual, and is intimately connected to a re-memory and re-valuation of the past.

Cocoa learns the true potentials of community from Mama Day and also from her relationship with George, recognizing at last how valuable, and powerful, she is as an individual, and in community. Mama Day, as a spiritual guide, recognizes that Cocoa is a link to George’s spiritual growth and his recognition of his place in a larger community. Abigail asks, “How is he gonna fight something he ain’t a part of?” (267). Mama Day responds, “He’s a part of her, Abigail. And that’s the part that Ruby done fixed to take out of our hands” (267). Naylor clearly contrasts Ruby and Junior Lee’s unnatural marriage (Ruby works roots on her man to manipulate him to her own desires) with the potentials of genuine connection represented in Cocoa and George’s love, “a miracle” (134-35).

The healing power of community is available to George through Cocoa’s love, Mama Day’s spiritual leadership, and a communal legacy of which both women are a

part. Cocoa, although she continues to live “mainside,” maintains her familial and spiritual ties to the community of Willow Springs, to her personal history and to a cultural legacy of Afrocentric spiritual practice and belief, carrying her values out into the world with her.

Naylor takes special care, it seems, to position the powerful matriarch Mama Day as both the daughter of the great and ancient Sapphira, the daughter of her own lost mother, and as her father’s child. Just as Mama Day comes to remember the name of the mythic Sapphira and to better understand her legacy, so does she more fully remember the loss of her own mother alongside the teachings and love of her father, John-Paul. The quilt she makes with Abigail represents the importance of integrating and connecting the ancestral voices, both distant and recent, both male and female. Mama Day quilts in rings and “overlapping circles” all tied to “golds for the middle of the quilt” (137). The quilt is constructed with intertwined pieces of

her daddy’s Sunday shirt, matched with Abigail’s lace slip, the collar from Hope’s graduation dress, the palm of Grace’s baptismal gloves . . . corduroy from her uncles, broadcloth from her great-uncles . . . Peace’s receiving blanket . . . Cocoa’s baby jumper . . . a pocket from her own gardening apron . . . the front of Mother’s gingham shirtwaist. (137)

The quilt symbolizes the communal ideal, the model Mama Day envisions and which the indigenous African spiritual traditions value, in which the bond with others exists alongside individual strength, serves to preserve the spiritual and cultural inheritances of the past, and offers hope and vision for the future. This communal model ideal is

founded on the love and cooperation of men, women and children who remember the integrity of their connections while respecting the value of all individuals. As Cocoa comes to know, “there are some times in your life when you have to call upon the best of all God gave you—and the best of what He didn’t” (101). She has learned both the value and power of the self and the need for a community of interconnectedness, where men, women and children know their best selves and give that to others, embodying the Divine and filling in the spaces that “He didn’t” (101).

The women who act as spiritual leaders in *Beloved* similarly promote a vision of African-American community that re-values an ancient past and offers hope for the future. The divisiveness fostered by the false world of slavery, the mind set that has distorted the community’s vision of Baby Suggs’ intentions, is eventually healed by the end of the novel. Morrison refutes the communal distortion that led to the women saying:

Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone. (137)

Instead, Morrison offers a vision by which each of those jealous women, and all their men and children, can tap into the holiness of Baby Suggs for themselves, can value their own powers and clearly understand their priestess’s own very human struggles. Morrison, through Baby Suggs’ example, creates a hope for the future in which members

of the African-American community don't feel the need to test the "holiness" of their members as did the townspeople in not warning the women of Bluestone Road that Schoolteacher was coming—don't feel the need because that "holiness" is within each of them, and because it calls for an end to divisiveness and a re-memory of all that is worth preserving.

Sethe's disconnection from her community, which, the text suggests, is both instigated by others and imposed on herself, equals her spiritual disease. She begins to regret her loss: "Years ago—when 124 was alive—she had women friends, men friends from all around to share grief with. Then there was no one, for they would not visit her while the baby ghost filled the house, and she returned their disapproval with the potent pride of the mistreated" (96). Morrison suggests the false belief that communal re-memory and rejuvenation is impossible. She suggests that there is hope for healing what Sethe has come to believe: "The twenty-eight days of having women friends, a mother-in-law, and all her children together; of being part of a neighborhood; of, in fact, having neighbors at all to call her own—all that was long gone and would never come back" (173). Morrison suggests that there is hope for a new creation of the "twenty-eight days. . . of unslaved life . . . days of healing, ease and real-talk. Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done; of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better" (95). Here lies Morrison's suggestion for the use of myth; The novel suggests that in the re-memory of ancient spiritual values, the strengthening of individual selves as well as larger communities, there is wholeness and hope.

Paul D signifies a reluctance to value women's power and women's community.

He becomes angry at “hearing the three of them laughing at something he wasn’t in on. The code they used among themselves that he could not break. Maybe even the time spent on their needs and not his” (132). What really seems to get to Paul D about these women needing one another only is that “they were a family somehow and he was not the head of it” (132). What Paul D comes to learn by the end of the novel is there is not a code he is entitled to “break,” and that the ideal communion with Sethe and her household doesn’t call for a hierarchical “head” represented in patriarchal power. He must come to learn that individual worth and power are possible in community. What Sethe wants and needs is for Paul D to see her whole self, and to love her body and soul, past, present, and future; her household does not need a master. Paul D must come to recognize that he needs others, that he can lean on Sethe even as she can lean on him. Morrison suggests that Paul D must overcome the belief that “the danger was in losing Sethe because he was not man enough ,” and the “shame” that “ he needed her, Sethe, to help him, to know about it” (127). He must learn that “the woman he wanted to protect” can offer him solace and protection in return, that communal love can be a sharing rather than a possession, a domination or a burden that denies the needs of the self (127).

Sethe must also, in the course of the novel, come to recognize her own need for connection. She must overcome the past, the fragmentation of her family ties through slavery which has led her to believe that “maybe a man was nothing but a man. . . They encouraged you to put some of your weight in their hands and soon as you felt how light and lovely that was, they studied your scars and tribulations, after which they . . . ran [the] children out and tore up the house” (22). Sethe’s reluctance to create new emotional and familial ties is based on her own past and a husband who we must

believe truly loved her, but was kept from her because the traumas he suffered broke him. Baby Suggs, as a spiritual leader, has, however, planted a seed in Sethe's mind that suggests a re-membered future of community: "A man ain't nothing but a man," said Baby Suggs. "But a son? Well now, that's somebody" (23). Sethe's reluctance is understandable, Morrison suggests: "It made sense for a lot of reasons because in all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized" (23). Yet when human ties are formed, when others are truly seen as full human beings with names and identities and inherent value, family life can be re-membered, restoring what slavery has stolen. Thus preserving one's kinship and ancestral ties takes on vital importance for individual and communal survival.

The ghost-child's voice in *Beloved* re-memories an experience from the Middle Passage: "In the beginning the women are away from the men and the men are away from the women, storms rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men" (211). Morrison takes the traumatic and horrific experience of African men and women who have been separated on the slave ships under the control of Anglo traders, and she re-imagines it symbolically for the African-American future. The possibility is that the "storm" of slavery and a brutal history, which threw the men and women together violently and mechanically, will be endured—that it will not rob the community of a future, and that the men and women will remember how to be together in communal healing, not segregated, "rocked" or "mixed" by powers outside themselves, but loving one another, together.

Morrison and Naylor's configuration of women's leadership power reflects a feminist spirituality in that it recognizes female strength and dignity, and posits the female presence as a guiding light for communal healing. Women's spiritual power is consistently grounded in the natural world, in a true accessibility and experiential presence, giving a voice to the dignity and value of the female presence in spiritual life. The feminist spirituality of these novels privileges a Black feminist consciousness in tune with African-American women's dual concerns of both race *and* gender. Morrison and Naylor have imagined fictional worlds in which an "ethnic cultural feminism" survives in a potent form, remembering that, as Denard has suggested, African-American women's allegiance to ancestral group "is foremost, " and that many African-American women feel compelled to shun "the kind of existential feminism embraced by many women of the majority culture" (172).



## **CONCLUSION:**

### **“THEY HAVE A LANGUAGE FOR IT”: MORRISON, NAYLOR, AND THE SPIRITUAL ENDEAVOR OF FEMALE AUTHORSHIP**

In the African indigenous tradition, the storyteller fulfills a sacred role. As Fisher notes, the storyteller carries the community's sacred traditions and teachings. This “spiritual specialist” role is particularly valued by the group because of the danger of losing the ancestral stories and thus the spiritual connection to the past (51). As McAninch-Runzi has suggested, African-American feminists all seem to agree that storytelling is important. He says,

Through storytelling, women of color ‘explain the world’ to themselves. But they also discover themselves and who they are in the parthenogenesis of storytelling. In Yahweh-like manner, Black women create their own being by using—or, rather, co-opting—the only tool of power available to them: language. Ironically, this tool of control is in its very essence phallogentric and projects divisive and dualistic values. Nonetheless, Black women storytellers’ understanding of language is one of parthenogenic creation and self-realization. They use the ‘master’s tool’ both destructively—in that they genuinely attempt to dissemble a hierarchical and

dualistic structure with its patriarchal dominance—and  
creatively—in that they image alternative communities with  
mutually empowered and empowering women. (173)

Mc-Aninch-Runzi suggests, then, that storytelling is a spiritual act that may foster personal, political, and communal power.

Marjorie Pryse argues that Black writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker view “folk magic as art and fiction as a form of conjuring” (2). She suggests that Walker, for example, embraces a vision of ancient women’s magic “which, in the Black community, has often taken other forms but has also long included literary expression” (2). Pryse articulates these writers’ storytelling as a form of magic or “conjure,” and she recognizes storytelling’s implications for community and for a vision of an African-American women’s literary tradition. She suggests that in the 1970s and 1980s, Black women novelists “have become metaphorical conjure women . . . who make it possible for their readers and for each other to recognize their common literary ancestors (gardeners, quilt makers, grandmothers, rootworkers, and women who wrote autobiographies) and to name each other as a community of inheritors” (5). Pryse suggests a cultural-historical revision and a feminist ideology underlying this writerly tradition: “Exploring the apparent anomaly of connection within a heritage of separation, Black women novelists challenge the authenticity and accuracy of an American history that failed to record their voices and a literary history—written by Black men as well as white—that has compounded the error of that neglect” (4). Pryse also examines the history of literary authority in American writing, pointing to the traditionally male-dominated Puritan ideology that ascribed textual authority to an Anglo, patriarchal God.

As she notes, “the Puritans bequeathed to subsequent generations, long after the waning of Puritanism as theology, the association between formal authority and written texts; and that formal authority was male” (9). This thread, so strong and prevalent in the American literary tradition, deemed the authority of folk storytellers and folk traditions “primitive” and “heretical” (9). Pryse documents that not until the fiction of Charles Waddell Chestnutt in the late nineteenth century does a Black writer take authority for his own creativity, writing out of the “magic” of Black folk life, and “thereby finding a form for Black authority that can avoid challenging prevailing assumptions about literary power” (10). In Pryse’s view, Chestnutt set the scene for Zora Neale Hurston to “take conjuring a great leap forward, and with it, transposing the terms of literary authority for Black women writers” (11). The tradition, then, has been passed forward to new generations of writers, such as Walker, Morrison and Naylor, who creatively configure the powers of Black folk magic and Black tradition for themselves.

Lesley Northrup’s feminist scholarship has characterized the creation of texts as a spiritual and creative ritual.<sup>1</sup> And, as Carson has defined it, feminist spirituality is marked by a belief that the Divine can be called upon for creative uses (6). Carson suggests that contemporary feminist activism and theory have begun to embrace a particular kind of renaissance wherein “we are sharing stories of a women’s culture . . . creating artwork that reweaves the threads of feminine experience” (1). The creative acts of women’s storytelling and writing, then, may be understood as *spiritual* acts that preserve female culture, “reweaving” its threads.

*Beloved* and *Mama Day* are novels that may also be classified as spiritual writings – those which, in Susan Cahill’s words, “transform understanding and intuition into

language” (xv). Women’s spiritual writings, as Cahill describes them, often “come out of the particular grounds of a gendered experience” and work toward “the truth of things that radiate from the actual, often dense circumstances of life” (xv-xvi). Writing the stories of a syncretic spiritual legacy and of lived experience, the “truth of things,” seems particularly important for contemporary African-American women writers. The stories and the spirituality are the fruits of “their mothers’ gardens” re-discovered. Contemporary African-American women writers such as Morrison and Naylor are, in their fiction, finding release for the pent-up “springs of creativity” Walker speaks of, reclaiming the “Creator” foremothers and redeeming the state of “spiritual waste” they were historically subjected to (223). From the perspective of Black feminism, the spiritual concerns, values, and experiences of Black women must be told and “re-remembered” as an act of communal survival.

“They have a language for it,” Toni Morrison has said of African-American women and their spirituality (Taylor-Guthrie 269). Morrison and Naylor, in and through the act of writing, have captured this spiritual “language” and have configured spirituality as a force to be summoned for creative purposes. Gloria Naylor says of her creative process,

You know, there are moments with my work when . . . it’s as if I’ve arrived in a place where it’s all spirit and no body—an overwhelming sense of calm . . . I guess I keep at it because of those times when I can reach that spiritual center. It’s like floating in the middle of that river, and waves are all around you . . . I actually begin to feel blessed. (Naylor “A Conversation” 581)

Naylor says she works to be “worthy to be used as [a] medium” in writing (586). She understands her role as a writer in terms of serving as “a filter for these stories”—stories she says come to her in “waking, psychic revelations” (Perry 225). For Naylor, the stories she tells are the ones she is mysteriously “entrusted with,” and she forms them into texts because writing is her “God-given gift” (224). Naylor’s writerly stance closely resembles that taken in Alice Walker’s postscript to *The Color Purple* when she writes, “I thank everybody in this book for coming,” and signs it “A.W., author and medium” (296). Naylor says *Mama Day* is “an exploration of magic,” the “magic of the imagination” (233). In the novel she seeks to make the reader aware that “the act of reading itself is an act of magic” (233).

Toni Morrison has described her writing process with *Beloved* as emerging largely from “a presence or some information that does not come out of any research that I’ve done” (Taylor-Guthrie “Conversations” 249). John McClure, in his scholarship on postmodern and “post-secular” fiction, characterizes Morrison as a writer whose work represents a “complex kind of come-back” of spiritual consciousness (148). Morrison herself seems to view writing as a spiritually-rich process. The way Morrison understands the writer’s spiritual channeling is “to have an idea and to know that it’s alive” (249). Using religious language, Morrison says the artist is a message bringer who “bears witness” (4). Her spiritual ritual of writing seems to be noticeably of the school of Black feminism, and of the philosophy of feminist spirituality, in its communal focus: “They say that my writing is rich. It’s not—what’s rich, if there is any richness, is what the reader gets and brings him or herself. That’s part of the way in which the tale is told . . . It’s not over just because it stops. It lingers and it’s passed on” (253). Morrison says, “A

Black artist, for me, is not a solitary person who has no responsibility to the community. It's a totally communal experience. . . . I want somebody to say Amen!" (231). Her artistic focus in creating *Beloved*, Morrison says, was also inherently communal and concerned with power: "The slaveholders have won if this experience is beyond my imagination and my powers. . . . You have to take the authority back; you realign where the power is. I have to *take* it back—in a way that I can tell it" (245). She says she speaks to the reader, at least in part, out of "the special kind of knowledge that Black women have always had," knowledge that she says has been "discredited, . . . called old wives' tales, or gossip, or anything but information" (154). As the preceding chapters have argued, the feminist spirituality employed by Morrison and Naylor in "passing on" Afrocentric spiritual beliefs and practices remains enormously concerned with community and with an appropriation of power—power appropriated to women, to the African-American community, and to African indigenous spiritual values. Morrison calls upon the spiritual space of creative "imagination" in her writing. She then, in turn, acts as a steward of a spirituality that values female power and conceptualizes a model for African-American community in indigenous spiritual values.

Harryette Mullen's scholarship has sought to recognize and, she says, re-value African writing traditions. She points to a history of African-American women, such as the Shaker Rebecca Cox Jackson, who have understood literacy to be the result of "divine instruction" (684). According to Mullen, African-American writers such as Morrison and Naylor write texts that on some level are "visionary" or spiritual narratives and that embody important African spiritual traditions such as religious writing and the use of healing charms (681). She says these writers have "preserved aspects of African and

diasporic cultural consciousness in their syncretically visual and visionary works” (686).

Mullen posits spiritual texts, in an Afrocentric framework, as “ritual objects” (681).

If *Beloved* and *Mama Day* can be seen as spiritual texts in some sense and as ritual objects, then Morrison and Naylor have, in the tradition of feminist spirituality, accessed the Divine, here in this world, in its physicality, using it for creative and spiritual purposes. They have taken on the role of the sacred storytellers, tapping into a powerfully female force that fosters cohesive community and cultural survival. They have recognized the spiritual power of women’s creativity, actively transcribing the sacred in the space of the text.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> See Northrup's book, *Ritualizing Women: Patterns of Spirituality*, 1997.



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