

THE ORIGINAL PLACE: LOCATING SELECT AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S  
TEXTS IN AN AFRICAN-CENTERED WOMANIST FRAMEWORK

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by

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE ORIGINAL PLACE: LOCATING SELECT AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S TEXTS IN AN AFRICAN-CENTERED WOMANIST FRAMEWORK**

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Although Black women's literature existed before the late twentieth century, in the 1970s and 1980s, critics began debating seriously the evaluative criteria that should define the tradition. The activism of writers and critics, such as Alice Walker, not only helped position Black women's literature in academia, but also insisted that it reflects a unique voice that warrants its examination in a context that is both race- and gender-conscious. In "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," Deborah McDowell urges "Black feminist critics to...consider the specific language of Black women's literature, to describe the ways Black women writers employ literary devices in a distinct way, and to compare the way Black women writers create their own mythic structures" (qtd. in Mason 5). Her gynocritical approach to Black women's literature, and that of other

womanist critics, allowed for a further specialization of the evaluative criteria that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. suggested defined the African-American literary tradition as a whole. However, despite the work of Deborah McDowell and her contemporaries, “Black women artists, in the last decade of the twentieth century, remain semi-muffled, semi-invisible and relatively obscure,” according to Frieda High Tesfagiorgis (228). Tesfagiorgis’ claim refers to the lack of a critical discourse that moves the art and “artwriting” of Black women beyond the “defensive posture of merely responding to their objectification and misrepresentation by others” (228-9).

This paper argues that in order to move the evaluation and analysis of Black women’s narratives beyond the extent to which they are a response to marginalization and objectification, critical discourse must consider the role of African motifs in the texts. This thesis examines key African-centered womanist themes-- the oral tradition and its influence on the way language is used in texts, spirituality and self-actualization against the backdrop of community--in works by Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker and emerging authors in the black women’s literary canon. The argument is grounded in how these themes manifest in the works of select African women authors and in works by African-American women. A discussion of current theories for evaluating African-American women’s works demonstrates the lack of a theory that grounds work by African-American women, specifically, in an African-centered womanist literary framework.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

I recently presented a paper at a conference, after which a woman in the audience mentioned to me her difficulty with teaching Beloved to her first-year college students. She said her students found the narrative disjointed and the spiritual elements in the text unsettling. After our conversation, I wondered what--if anything--her students had learned about West African culture and norms before reading the novel, that may have helped explain the disjointedness of the narrative and the unsettling (that is to say decidedly non-Western) spiritual elements in the text. Had the novel been located in an African-centered womanist context before their reading it, the students would have understood that the disjointedness of the narrative simulated the experience of storytelling, which is inherently fragmented rather than linear. The students would have also understood that the spirituality in the novel is unsettling only inasmuch as it is not Christian-based; however, in a West African context, the characters' interactions with the ghost, Beloved, and Baby Suggs' preaching in the clearing would be considered a familiar occurrence.

After I left this conference, it occurred to me that if students were given an African-centered womanist framework characterized by common threads in works by African-American women that clarified both the African-ness and female-ness in texts,

this framework would enrich the dialogue about texts by established African-American women writers and provide a relevant cultural context within which to locate works by emerging authors.

To provide an African-centered cultural context within which to locate these texts and enrich the dialogue that surrounds African-American women's literature, this paper proposes the following themes as key signifiers of an African-centered womanist framework for evaluating texts by African-American women writers: 1) the way the oral tradition manifests in the narrative and the way language is conveyed, 2) the values that guide the spiritual quality of the work and 3) the way that characters explore and reach self-actualization. As the following chapter indicates, these three themes become African-centered not because of their mere presence in the work (for many cultures embrace orality and convey spirituality and self-actualization in their literary works) but by the way authors convey these themes in the text. These themes in the novels explored herein also become simultaneously womanist because they are explored in the context of community, which is both an African-centered and a womanist attribute.

To establish an African-centered literary framework within which to analyze the works of African-American women, a theory must consider the ideas of feminism and womanism in the context of West African culture. Gwendolyn Mikell describes feminism in Africa as African woman working toward "the eradication of discrimination against women in customary norms, modern law, and social conventions" (411). In "Revisiting 'What's in a Name?': Exploring the Contours of Africana Womanist Thought," Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd and Evelyn N. Simien distinguish womanism from feminism by asserting that womanism involves "self-naming" and building "alliances" (70).



According to Alexander-Floyd and Simien, “Africana womanists are family-centered and community-centered, interested in collective outcomes and group achievement” (70).

Therefore, Floyd-Alexander and Simien argue that while African feminists are interested in “self realization and personal gratification,” womanists are interested in their own self-actualization and their capability to engender the wholeness of a people (70).

This concept of womanism takes into account the needs of the entire community and underscores themes not only in African women writers’ works, but also in works by African-American women writers. In much of their work, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor demonstrate Alexander-Floyd’s and Simien’s idea of womanism in that many protagonists in the works reach self-actualization through their connection with their communities. The interdependence of self-actualization and community (especially as explored through motherhood and marriage) is a highly indigenous ideal that starkly contrasts with Western notions of individualism. In fact, West Africans call the seduction of individual gain and material pursuits as promoted by the West a form of witchcraft. According to David Wehrs, witchcraft represents “in colonial and postcolonial contexts a way of critiquing modernity, the West, and those Africans who seek to be initiated into the ‘magic’ of Western acquisitive individualism” (150). The attitude that Western materialism is a form of witchcraft not only places Western and African beliefs about individualism at opposite ends of the spectrum, but also suggests a supernatural (in Western terms) or spiritual (in African terms) aspect of self-actualization.

Whereas, in the West, religion may permeate and guide many aspects of life, there is a keen distinction between the spirit world and the natural world. In Africa, this line is blurred--interaction with spirits and long-dead ancestors is a part of everyday life:

Key elements of African religions are beliefs in a spirit-infused natural world, reverence for spirits of ancestors, and a perceived unity between the natural and physical worlds. Magic--inhering in people's ability to make good or ill use of their connections with the spiritual world is part of religion. (Colton 33)

In the West, a spirit-infused natural world is considered supernatural; however, to Africans the spirit world is as natural as the world of the living. West Africans believe they are guided by their chi, the spirit of an ancestor or another departed loved one. The chi ensures Africans employ ethics in their daily decisions and helps those whom they guide choose between selfish action and action that benefits both the self and the community (Wehrs 180-2). For Africans, then, spirituality<sup>1</sup> binds the relationship between self-actualization and community mindfulness.

The oral tradition is an additional cultural signifier in West Africa that illustrates the interdependence between the self, the community and spirituality. Before written language, it was the duty of elders (or ancestors) to pass on the stories of a culture to their descendants. In these stories, ancestors outlined the history, religion, traditions and folklore of a people, and these stories were preserved by subsequent generations passing them on to their descendants.

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<sup>1</sup> The term spirituality will be used throughout the essay to mean African relationships with the unseen world and other African religious beliefs that would be construed as supernatural in the West.

In the West, as literary traditions grew, scholars began to place emphasis on the written word. The oral tradition provided a popular means of storytelling in the Middle Ages, but with the publishing of the first English book on Caxton's press in 1474, stories were transcribed and disseminated among a literate public. Printed literature created a division between the literate and the illiterate, making access to stories a privilege of the elite classes. By contrast, in Africa, cultural emphasis is placed on the spoken word, particularly stories that have been passed down by ancestors and are shared with new generations. In Africa, sharing stories is a way not just to disseminate information, but to connect with one another. In fact, communal activity is a signpost of the oral quality of a work, according to David Rudd. In his essay "Enid Blyton and the Mystery of Children's Literature," Rudd uses the following table to compare qualities of oral works to those of literary qualities of a work:

**Table 9.1 Literary versus oral qualities of texts.**

Literary qualities	Oral qualities
Style is paramount – polished	Style is secondary – 'first draft' stories
A novel/story is unique, a masterpiece for all time	Story changes to suit circumstances, time, audience
The work is thematically integrated: organic, hypotactic	The work is more linearly organized: open and paratactic
Imaginative	Sensory (visual, aural, tactile, and so on)
Character is central, rounded and motivated; emphasis on individual qualities, psychological, introspective	Character is secondary to action; schematically drawn; stock figures; archetypes, stereotypes; external perspective
Plagiarism is taboo, originality a premium	Draw on 'the tradition', derivative, intertextual
The 'Verbal Icon' is celebrated; text no context	Series oriented, open-ended, audience involvement, work as springboard for other activities (games, rituals, feasting and so on)
Definable corpus of texts is intrinsically valuable – the Great Tradition, the canon	Performance (that is, individual reading) is valuable in its own right
Language precise, logical, metaphorical	Language simple, repetitive, formulaic, clichéd, 'degree zero' writing
Authorial detachment – showing rather than telling	Authorial involvement – telling, evaluative comment, proximal deixis
Privatized activity, cerebral	Community activity, affective, visceral

(Rudd 166)

In Orality and Literacy, Walter J. Ong discusses in detail the idea that a key contrast in the oral and written tradition is plot organization. Whereas narrative plot in the written tradition tends to be linear, including ascending action, a climax and a denouement, the oral tradition tends to focus on the recall of memory (138-9). Further, the oral tradition depends heavily on the dynamic between the speaker and his or her audience:

The oral song (or other narrative) is the result of the interaction between the singer, the present audience, and the singer's memories of songs sung. In working with this interaction, the bard is original and creative on rather different grounds from those of the writer. (Ong 143)

Ong's explanation of the fundamental differences between oral and written traditions highlights the importance of community--an audience to listen to the stories being told. As Chapter 3 of this paper demonstrates, orality, like spirituality and the quest for self-actualization, is inextricably linked to the community in African women's fiction. Examining these themes in African women's texts will confirm they can effectively constitute an African-centered womanist framework within which to locate African-American women's texts.

As the chapters that trace these themes through works by African-American women will show, these African-centered womanist themes often juxtapose characters' assimilation with Western values and ways of life. This juxtaposition substantiates the need for a framework that considers the African-ness of a text, such as the one proposed herein, for if there is no tension between African and Western ideals in the text, then the work is fully Westernized and African symbols and themes are irrelevant. However,

where this tension exists, it will be clear that strictly Westernized theories for criticizing the work are not sufficient and an alternative context within which to locate and evaluate texts must be considered.

The following chapter examines existing critical theory about African-American literature to establish that currently no theory both takes an African-centered and womanist approach to texts and suggest a series of themes that establishes a framework within which to evaluate the African-ness and femaleness of the texts. By tracing these themes in two African women's novels, Chapter 3 establishes the African-ness and femaleness of orality, spirituality and self-actualization when these themes are examined against the backdrop of community.

To establish the prominence of these themes in African-American women's texts, subsequent chapters will trace the way orality, spirituality and self-actualization emerge against the backdrop of community through Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon, Gloria Naylor's Mama Day and Alice Walker's The Color Purple. The closing section of this thesis will demonstrate how these themes manifest in works by emerging African-American women authors. Ultimately, the African-centered womanist framework proposed herein provides an alternative cultural context within which to evaluate these works, thereby enriching the dialogue about this body of literature and making it more accessible to a wider audience.

## CHAPTER 2

### AN ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERARY THEORY

Until the late 1970s, theoretical approaches to African-American literature were scant, and theories dedicated to the criticism and analysis of African-American women's literature, specifically, did not exist. Since 1977, according to Theodore O. Mason, both "the appearance of more theoretically grounded approaches to African-American literary production [...] and the emergence of a vigorously feminist African-American literary theory" have marked the genres (1). However, despite the movement toward theoretically locating works by African-American writers, "by the end of the 1980s, the critical and theoretical concerns regarding the nature of African-American literary discourse remained for the most part unresolved" (Mason 7). Despite this lack of resolution, a number of theorists have added important considerations to discourses about the genre.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. introduced Signifyin(g) as a critical theory by which to analyze texts in his book The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism. Gates names the theory after the African-American trickster the Signifying Monkey, which according to Gates has "a curious tendency to reflect on the uses of formal language" (xxi). Grounded in the reflection on formal language, Gates' theory is based on an analysis of black vernacular in texts and how use of the vernacular

is a way of repeating and revising texts in the Western tradition. Of the black literary tradition Gates writes:

[B]lack texts employ many of the conventions of literary form that comprise the Western tradition. Black literature shares much with, far more than it differs from, the Western textual tradition [...] But black formal repetition always repeats with a difference, a black difference that manifests itself in specific language use. And the repository that contains the language that is the source--and the reflection--of black difference is the black English vernacular tradition. (xxii-xxiii)

Gates further asserts that “[W]hatever is black about black American literature is to be found in this identifiable black Signifyin(g) difference.” While Gates seems to want to define a critical premise by which to evaluate and define the black-ness of works by African-American writers, he qualifies his theory as not necessarily limited to black writers:

Lest this theory of criticism, however, be thought of as only black, let me admit that the implicit premise [...] is that all texts Signify upon other texts...Perhaps critics of other literatures will find this theory useful as they attempt to account for the configuration of the texts in their traditions. (xxiv-xxv)

By qualifying Signifyin(g) as a theory that can also be useful in the analysis of non-black texts, Gates dismisses blackness as necessary to Signifyin(g), thereby universalizing the concept and failing to provide a theory exclusive to the analysis of texts in the African-American tradition.

In Warriors Conjurers and Priests: Defining African-centered Literary Criticism,

Joyce A. Joyce argues that African-American literary criticism must be exclusively focused on the analysis of black art. Joyce stipulates that “rather than accepting the Euro-American criteria of art, the African-American writer/critic must look within, to self and community, for the inspiration needed to shape a characteristically Black art and to mold African-American minds” (3). Joyce claims:

Following the same pattern that describes all relationships between the oppressed and the oppressor, African-American scholars have constantly molded and shaped their ideas to satisfy the hegemony while the hegemony assumes that its intellectual thought pertains to the well-being and interests of all, even those whom it oppresses. (9)

Like Joyce, Molefi Kete Asante is concerned with locating African-American texts in an African-centered paradigm. In “Locating a Text: Implications of Afrocentric Theory,” Asante claims critics “must search the ancient foundations of the African’s cultural response to reality and environment as one looks to Greece or Rome for analogues in the Euro-American writers and authors” (10). While Joyce and Asante seek to locate texts in an African-centered context, neither focuses specifically on the simultaneous African-ness and female-ness of African-American women’s texts.

Whereas fiction by women writers occupies a niche in the literary canon and has precipitated the creation of literary paradigms within which to criticize it (such as feminist and gynocritical literary theory), literary theory that focuses on fiction by African-American women writers, specifically, taking into account the deviations in their work from norms adopted and used by white women writers, has proven elusive. In “New



Directions for Black Feminist Criticisms,” Deborah McDowell asks whether the accountability of white women scholars to black and Third World women writers will require them “to use a different set of critical tools when studying Black women writers” (172). The answer to McDowell’s question is yes, and one of the tools she suggests is adopting Barbara Smith’s recommendation of “isolating as many thematic, stylistic, and linguistic commonalities among Black women writers as possible” (173). MacDowell articulates thematic parallels that have been studied in works by Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston, including the thwarted artist, the “use of clothing as iconography” and the motif of the personal and psychological journey. MacDowell’s argument focuses on the lack of precision and detail in cultivating a black feminist literary theory that clearly separates black women writers’ work from that of white women and black male writers. She closes her argument:

Black feminist critics ought to [...] consider the specific language of Black women’s literature, to describe the ways Black women writers employ literary devices in a distinct way, and to compare the way Black women writers create their own mythic structures. (176)

MacDowell’s article focuses on the need for black women’s writing to both honor and distinguish itself from white feminism and from literature by African-American men. Her study articulates the challenge black women writers face of fitting in with established norms in literary criticism and feminism while charting a course that is unique to African-American women.

Like MacDowell, Susan Willis focuses on work by African-American women, specifically. Willis’ criticism of black women’s writing is grounded in a socio-economic

perspective of the agrarian South, the urban North and the history of black women within these dynamics. Of narratives by African-American women, Willis says, “I know of no other body of writing that so intimately partakes of the transformation from rural to urban society or so cogently articulates the change in its content as well as its form” (4).

According to Willis, several key elements within the dynamic of the “transformation” she cites inform the writing of black women, including “the black woman’s [...] relationship to mother and grandmother,” the history of black women as a labor force (“Almost every black woman living in the United States has as her past the accumulated work of all her female forbears” (6)) and the relationship between storyteller and audience, which is intertwined with black women as mothers and workers: “As workers, [black women] have sustained their families; as mothers, they have borne the oral histories from their grandmothers to their children” (7).

According to Willis, the nature of storytelling in black women’s narrative privileges the interaction of the community as part of the story being told:

Instead of an individual storyteller occupying a place of privilege, history and cultural tradition are privileged, as these are the lifeblood and spirit of the community. Furthermore, there is no separation between teller and text. Rather, the speaking subject is at one with the narrative, as are the listeners. (15)

Willis calls this mode of storytelling “specifying” or name-calling. Name-calling involves a speaker who initiates a “direct relationship between the names and the person being named.” This speaker is “[t]he only thing that stands between the signified and the signifier” (16). The name-caller, or one who specifies, “gives herself as guarantor of the

relationship, with the whole community standing witness to the contract” (16).

Specifying, then, is the means by which black women craft their narratives, maintaining unity with the subjects of their texts and their community as a whole but separating themselves as the name-callers of history. Through this separation, black women “signify” on history and, in doing so, correct and reshape it through their narratives, giving black women an authentic place in its fabric. While Willis’ theory focuses on African-American women’s works, and while name-calling derives from the African oral tradition, her theory lacks other signposts that ground works more definitively in an African-centered framework. Further, Willis asserts:

For today’s black women writers, the project of reclaiming history, although it may have its culmination in African culture, is more precisely aimed at a retrieval of the twenties, thirties, and early forties. [...] [T]he era of jazz, blues and the poetry of Langston Hughes. (72)

Therefore, while Willis is concerned with establishing a self for the black woman (as McDowell is), she definitely separates black women from their African heritage, grounding the reclamation of their history in twentieth century America. McDowell’s theory lacks an exploration of the African-ness of works of black women writers, altogether. By contrast, Joyce and Asante’s criticisms are concerned with the ways that ancestry informs the writing of black authors but do not focus specifically on the experience of black women. Further, Gates’ Signifyin(g) theory is not exclusive to African-American literature and has been criticized as being a distinctly male theory (Bucknell 79).

In discussing approaches to criticism of African literature, Abiola Irele refers to the “problem of identification,” which involves “the extent to which a critic can respond fully to a work which not only contains references outside his own realm of experience but which [...] appeals to a kind of sensibility with which he is not familiar” (37). Irele’s argument speaks to the inherent problem of evaluating works by African authors in a Eurocentric context and, by extension, the problem in evaluating works by African-American authors in this context. Although relevant to criticizing the works of authors who are born into and grow out of Eurocentric modes of existence, a theory grounded in Eurocentricity is insufficient to evaluate the work of authors whose experiences not only sit outside this realm of existence, but also suffer a complicated and painful history because of European ideals. With this challenge in mind, a culturally grounded framework for evaluating the works of both African and African-American authors should include an understanding of “everything that has gone into the work, and specifically [...] everything [...] which has informed the work (Irele 37). For African-American women writers, the combined legacy of slavery, racism and gender concerns unique to black women, as well as traditions that stem from their African ancestry have informed many works by African-American women writers (including Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor and other black women writers not commonly, or not yet, considered in academia) and should be a central focus in the evaluation of their narratives.

Current critical theory, then, fails to merge the idea of a definitive self for the black woman not based on Eurocentric norms, but rather grounded in the black woman’s African heritage. To establish a theoretical framework that considers both aspects of

black women's identities it is important to consider signposts of West African culture and norms in literature by African women writers. Once specific cultural and literary norms are grounded in African women's writing, their use in African-American women's writing can help determine the unique way African-American women "create their own mythic structures" in American literature (MacDowell 176).

### CHAPTER 3

#### ORALITY, SPIRITUALITY AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION IN WORKS BY TWO AFRICAN WOMEN WRITERS

African women novelists use the oral tradition to structure their prose and often center myth in their texts. The oral structure, privileging speech over the written word, underscores the interdependence between the self and the other, which is perhaps the most prevalent theme in narratives by African women. Ama Ata Aidoo and Buchi Emecheta explore self-actualization for women through marriage, motherhood and career. In these authors' works, self-actualization is completely interdependent with ideas of community because, in West African cultures, the self is bound to the community by an ethical obligation to achieve a greater social good through actions of the self. Further, in these works, Aidoo and Emecheta emphasize characters' interaction with ancestors and spirits in their daily life, which is considered a realistic psychological experience for the characters; however, in European culture, the same phenomena demonstrated in texts would be defined as magical realism.

In Changes: A Love Story, Ghanaian author Aidoo explores the role of women in African society through two friends, Esi and Opokuya. Esi works as a data analyst for the Ghanaian government in the country's capital, Accra. She takes her profession seriously, which causes problems in her marriage to a traditional African man who believes that a

woman's role is to be a wife and mother. Ultimately, Esi and her husband divorce, which also drives a wedge between her and her daughter, Ogyaanowa, who perceives that her mother chooses her career over her family. Esi's friend Opokuya is also a mother and wife and has a career as a nurse/mid-wife.

Changes is structured around the oral tradition and includes discourses on spirituality and self-actualization, while keeping the idea of community central. Of the oral tradition in Africa, Liz Gunner says:

Orality needs to be seen in the African context as a means by which societies of varying complexities regulated themselves, organized their present and their pasts, made formal spaces for philosophical reflections, pronounced power, questioned and in some cases contested power, and generally paid homage to 'the word.' [...] Orality was the means by which Africa made its existence, its history, long before colonial and imperial presence manifested itself. (1)

In Changes, Aidoo demonstrates "Akan oral discourse...through the use of *kasakoa* (metaphor), *akutia* (innuendo, or an *ebe* (proverb))" (Wehrs 135) and, in using these techniques, she pays homage to the word in the way Gunner describes. Vincent O. Odamtten argues that Aidoo's use of the oral tradition disrupts Western "generic compartmentalization in ways that demand criticism...acknowledging the *interdependence* of [the] *social whole*" (Wehrs 140). Aidoo uses the oral tradition to both structure the text and point to the significance of the community--the social whole--in African culture. By privileging the oral tradition and the importance of community,

both Aidoo's narrative structure and its content reflect the interdependence of the self and the community.

One of the strategies Aidoo uses to explore the interdependence of self and community is the motif of motherhood. In Akan matrilineal culture, motherhood is sacred because mothers nurse their children, which is considered an infant's greatest need and a human being's first right in the physical world:

The Akan have an acute sense of the dependency of the human being. On first appearance in this world, one [...] [has] the greatest need [...] The right to be nursed, then, is the first human right. In the fullness of time it will be transformed dialectically into a duty to nurse one's mother in her old age. (Levinas qtd. in Wehrs 142)

According to Wehrs, having been nursed prepares humans to nurture others and gives children a sense of duty to their community. Nursing, says Wehrs, "is the precondition--materially, psychologically, socially--for the next generation's ethical disposition and activity" (Wehrs 142). A mother nursing her child, thus, prepares a child to cultivate a sense of ethics in his or her interaction with the world.

In Changes, motherhood is explored through the characters Esi and Opokuya, as well as Nana, Esi's grandmother. Nana functions as the ancestor figure in the novel and says that "every time she gave birth, she 'died a little,' [which] resonates with an Akan recognition that if one refuses to die a little by having children, the community will die completely" (Wehrs 159). Nana's sentiment reflects the overarching concern in Changes that highlights a challenge in West African culture that women face: the extent to which they are free to become self-actualized in ways that extend beyond motherhood. To



illustrate this challenge, Aidoo characterizes Esi as a woman seeking to become self-actualized through her career to the exclusion of her obligations as a mother. Although the novel presents Esi's desire to pursue a professional career as a genuine good, it also presents Esi's relations to her career as entirely self-centered: "Esi's focus on self engenders a 'childish petulance' and 'self-pity' that is simply unethical in its inattentiveness to others" (Wehrs 149).

The idea that work should be of value to others is a distinct characteristic that sets apart African women's fiction from their male counterparts and that of European women's fiction. As Aidoo demonstrates through Esi's selfishness, it will not do for an African woman to be career-focused at the expense of the social whole. This value is a key theme explored in the fiction of African-American women, as well, that sets it apart from fiction by African-American men and fiction by white American women.

Amid the struggle for self-actualization in the context of the good of the social whole are representations of spirituality. While Ghana in the mid-1980s was becoming more Westernized, Jerry John Kwasi Rawlings' leadership during that time strove to put in place a "system where accumulation, doing well personally, need not come at the expense of the community" (Wehrs 165). However, Aidoo's characterization of Esi is in conflict with this ideal and "underscores how little she thinks about her career at all, except in terms of what it can do for *her*" (Wehrs 165).

In this context, although economic progress overall is considered positive, if this progress is at the expense of traditional values--including the sacrifice of the prominence of motherhood in Akan culture--it is viewed as an unethical way of being. In fact, the Akan name the imbalance of Western materialistic values witchcraft, which, according to

Wehrs, is a “way of critiquing modernity, the West, and those Africans who seek to be initiated into the ‘magic’ of Western acquisitive individualism” (150). Esi is characterized as on the brink of being a witch in that her focus on career is purely selfish and overshadows her sense of duty as mother. Esi’s egocentric pursuit of her career illustrates the idea of witchcraft in West African terms. In *Changes*, Esi’s portrayal as a witch infuses in the text an otherworldly sense of the everyday--a sense of things beyond the physical world. This characterization of Esi integrates a spiritual component into text’s discourse on self-actualization and community.

Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta’s personal life has heavily influenced her fiction. Emecheta’s husband abandoned her and their four small children while she was pregnant with their fifth child. To Emecheta and the Igbo culture this “self-involved egoism” is a form of “anti-social violence” (Wehrs 171). Like Esi, Emecheta is interested in exploring the obligation of attending to the family and community while pursuing self-actualization. In Emecheta’s *Kehinde*, her protagonist of the same name, “locates identity within human and spiritual networks of affiliation and obligation” (Wehrs 172).

While Kehinde is sorting through her husband’s demand that she have an abortion against her will, she hears the voice of her twin (known as her Taiwo), who was stillborn, saying, ‘Our mother died having you. I too died so you could live. Are you now going to kill your child before he has a chance of life?’ Emecheta uses relationship between Kehinde and her dead twin not only to highlight a spiritual signpost of West African culture, but also “to explore Yoruba and Igbo beliefs of the “relationship between spiritual indebtedness to others and one’s ‘own’ identity [...] Through recognizing her affiliation with Taiwo [her twin], through locating herself within networks of dependence

and obligation, Kehinde is able to assert herself” (Wehrs 177). The idea of dependence and obligation to others as a way to achieve selfhood is contrary to Western beliefs about the need for disentanglement from obligations to achieve self-actualization.

Also contrary to Western beliefs is Kehinde’s relationship with her Taiwo. In the West, depicting an ongoing relationship with the deceased would be considered magical realism; however, Emecheta characterizes an important aspect of West African spirituality with Kehinde’s relationship with her Taiwo--the daily interaction with spirits. According to Wehrs, Kehinde’s relationship with her dead twin “produce[s] empowering self-understanding [ ...] which may require to the reader’s voluntary assent to a religious frame of reference that goes beyond what the novel may affirm as certain” (Wehrs 179).

Kehinde’s Taiwo is her *chi*, or a spirit that helps guide the actions of the living. Emecheta’s own *chi* influences the way she approaches her work:

Emecheta describes her own *chi* repeatedly urging her to resist colonialistic and masculinist oppression, to overcome despondency and lack of self-confidence. The notion of the *chi* articulates an understanding that to be human is to bound up with an infinity that transcends totality, to be in such intimate, immediate contact with the divine that one cannot be, in justice, contained within any socially constructed totality [...]. (Wehrs 193)

Wehrs’ assertion confirms that in Igbo culture, as articulated by Emecheta, an ethical sense of self is interdependent with both notions of spirituality and the community as a whole.

Emecheta’s use of the oral tradition also demonstrates the importance of community: “Emecheta suggests that ‘talk[ing] to each other leads to sharing, that the

recognition of the other as kind, a recognition mediated through speech, allows one to move beyond what materialist-egoist modes of analysis can grasp” (Wehrs 173). As we see in Kehinde and Changes, there is no separation between form (orality) and thematic content and no separation of thematic elements from one another: orality lends itself to connection, and spirituality underscores every aspect of self-exploration, which in turn cannot be separated from the greater network of the community. This interdependence of form and content, as well as the interdependence of thematic discourse which emphasizes ethical obligations to a greater social good, is grounded in West African values and ideals.

As subsequent chapters in this essay demonstrate, structural techniques and thematic motifs used by select African-American women writers more closely aligns their work to that of African women writers like Aidoo and Emecheta than to their white and/or male counterparts. In Kehinde, Emecheta repeatedly asserts that cultural beliefs and values should be informed and “renewed” by actual experiences. Her novel suggests that “other cultural beliefs, based upon false ideologies, show themselves in the course of lived experience to be ultimately only means of justifying power inequities” (Wehrs 187).

This principle informs the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker and emerging voices in the canon of African-American women’s literature in that the discourses in narratives by these black American women insists that their specific experiences are closely related to their African female counterparts and not the false ideologies of the racist, patriarchal society into which their ancestors were forcibly thrust and in which they continue to be oppressed. For example, when Zora Neale Hurston first published Their Eyes Were Watching God in 1937, the novel was

excoriated by several black male writers and critics, including James Weldon Johnson and Richard Wright, for using a “minstrel technique that makes the ‘white folk’ laugh” (Corse and Griffin, 178). However, Johnson’s and Wright’s criticism mimicked the oppressive tone that white critics took when examining their work: because it did not fit within their socio-political priorities, they discounted it as poorly written. They failed to see the African-ness in Hurston’s work and failed to understand the importance of conveying human experience over catering to false ideologies that ultimately engender the same racist, oppressive frameworks that Johnson and Wright sought to destroy with their art. Similarly, the works of Morrison and Walker have been harshly criticized and banned outright, and whereas Naylor’s Eurocentric critics have been less harsh, many have simply characterized much of her work as a refiguring of Shakespeare, seemingly so that they can more easily evaluate its content.

These narrow interpretations and criticisms of Hurston’s, Morrison’s, Naylor’s and Walker’s narratives ignore their undeniable link to African-centered womanist structures and modes of discourse, which are as prevalent in their works as they are in works by Aidoo and Emecheta. According to Wehrs:

[I]f the West is ever to cease patronizing Africa it must begin to grasp the narrowness and nonnecessity of its own conception of modernity. Only if the West grows willing to become strange to itself [...] will African feminist fiction become accessible as more than the echo of Western voices, as speech whose difference matters. (204)

The same notion may be applied to the approach to works by African-American women: only if readers and critics are willing to allow Western ideals to “become strange” will

the African-ness of literary texts by African-American women emerge and transcend the “echo of Western voices” to be heard as “speech whose difference matters.”

## CHAPTER 4

### LOCATING THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD IN AN AFRICAN-CENTERED WOMANIST FRAMEWORK

Zora Neale Hurston's work is the logical place to begin an exploration of the African-ness of works by African-American women: Hurston is the African-centered literary foremother (ancestor) to Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor and emerging African-American women writers. Misunderstood in her own time because of her unapologetic interest in and demonstration of her African heritage, Hurston merged her anthropological interest in people of Africa and the African diaspora with her literary career, creating works that during the Harlem Renaissance were harshly criticized by African-American male critics, but later celebrated as a true model of black pride and racial health by Alice Walker, Margaret Walker and other Black writers and critics.

Hurston produced a significant body of work, including essays, short stories and novels; among her most infamous (in her time) and widely read works is her novel Their Eyes Were Watching God (herein referred to as Their Eyes). Although the novel in many ways reads like other written literature (and is often narrated in the third person rather than first person), Hurston frames the novel as a story told by one friend (Janie) to another (Phoeby), implying that the tale is grounded in the oral tradition. In the first chapter of the novel, Janie, the novel's protagonist, returns to her hometown and tells the

story of her life to her friend Phoeby. The following exchange between Janie and Phoeby frames the novel as a story that is told rather than a book that is written:

Well then, we can set right where we is and talk. Ah got the house all opened up to let dis breeze get a little catchin'.

Phoeby, we been kissin'-friends for twenty years, so Ah depend on you for a good thought. And Ah'm talking to you from dat standpoint.

Time makes everything old so the kissing, young darkness became a monstropolous old thing while Janie talked. (THEIR EYES 7)

Following this exchange, the narrator frames the novel as Janie's story told in her own words.

In addition to the structure of the novel, which rests on the oral tradition, a central feature of Hurston's Their Eyes is its dialogue. Through characters' storytelling, Hurston explores black vernacular, the use of which unifies the community in the novel through a common language and links the characters to their West African heritage. In the socio-political climate of Harlem in the 1930s, use of vernacular in the eyes of many of Hurston's contemporaries was the equivalent of fashioning a minstrel show that substantiated whites' beliefs that the African-American was sub-human. Because Hurston, a black woman writer, was among the first to introduce black vernacular in the literary sphere, her approach to language and dialogue is both feminist (in that Hurston refused to be stifled by ideals that she thought were to her personal detriment as a black woman) and grounded in African-centered ideals.

In their criticism of Their Eyes, Richard Wright and James Weldon Johnson argued that Hurston degraded black culture in her use of black vernacular dialogue



between characters. In this way, Wright and Johnson mirror the opinion of some critics in Africa who argued against linguistic creativity, or the deviation from elevated English in writing published by blacks, insisting that “no one will learn the language of a people without any economic or political power” (Okafor 6). Since Johnson and Wright were part of a movement that sought to position blacks alongside whites in all aspects of society, they saw no place for black expression that might make whites perceive blacks as less educated, less moral or otherwise less capable of political, economic and artistic equality.

Since the independence of African nations and the formation of a literary aesthetic on the continent, the language debate has raged: should Africans write in indigenous African languages or in the language of their colonizers? Whereas one camp argues that “true African independence requires a literature of one’s own in one’s own language,” the other camp (including the estimable Chinua Achebe) argues that the “use of the imperial language” both is inevitable and allows for “creative manipulation that purges the language of its Eurocentric *sprachgeist*” (Okafor 6).

Language patterns in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes* demonstrates that the manipulation of the “imperial language” not only purges the Eurocentric spirit of the language, but also reframes the literary dynamic which the language produces. For example, from a stereotypical perspective, Hurston’s dialogue may be construed as quaint, at best, or the mark of a lack of education, at worst; her “animal stories” may be seen as an entertaining diversion from the plotline of Janie’s journey through three marriages; her “porch talkers” might be considered amusing secondary characters serving to characterize the local color of Eatonville. Viewed in this light, one can understand the

criticisms of Wright, Johnson and their contemporaries writing in the protest tradition in 1937, and also more modern critics with similar concerns. In fact, if this novel is read and interpreted strictly from this perspective, a politically oriented, progressive African-American reader might concur that, while Hurston may tell a good story, the images she presents are damaging, overall, to the political and social progress of African Americans.

Hurston, however, recognized the danger of complete assimilation and sought, instead, to paint a picture of what Alice Walker called in In Search of Her Mother's Gardens "racial health" (85). Contrary to Wright, Johnson and other critics, Walker believed that Hurston's use of the oral tradition in allowing the stories that her characters tell in Their Eyes to be told in their own language returned to blacks all of the stories they had lost in the pre-Civil Rights south as they struggled to assimilate into a culture that persisted in discriminating against them. In her essay "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View," published in In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, Walker says of Hurston, "Zora's pride in black people was so pronounced in the ersatz black twenties that it made other blacks suspicious and perhaps uncomfortable (after all, *they* were still infatuated with things European). Zora was interested in Africa, Haiti, Jamaica [...]" (85).

In her assertion, Walker hints at the novel's importance because of its connection to African traditions, yet the evaluative criteria used by Walker, and other positive critics in the 1960s and 1970s, neglect to point out that among the novel's strengths is its connection to an African ancestral context. In neglecting the African motifs in Their Eyes, critics and readers unfamiliar with African cultural traditions may not grasp why the novel, and the way it depicts its characters, is in fact a model of black pride, rather

than a perpetuation of stereotypes. Locating the novel in an African-centered womanist framework subverts critical theory grounded in Eurocentric values and creates a new evaluative context within which to regard Their Eyes.

A critical component of Their Eyes is the oral tradition, which Hurston privileges by incorporating storytelling and by using black vernacular as a manifestation of the combination of West African languages and English. Janie loved working at the Starks' store not for the work itself but for the stories of the "porch talkers." Hurston characterizes the store as a place where "people sat around on the porch and passed around the pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see [...] the fact that the thought pictures were always crayon enlargements of life made it even nicer to listen to" (THEIR EYES 48). In his introduction to Hurston's folklore anthology Mules and Men, Robert Hemenway states that "the oral tradition (in this case African-American folklore) has historically promoted African-American dignity" (Hemenway qtd. in Vickers 304). The promise of the tales of courtship and gossip and the celebration of community bring the people of Eatonville together on the porch of the Starks' store. According to Anita Vickers in "The Reaffirmation of African-American Dignity Through the Oral Tradition in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God," the characters use their power of speech to reaffirm their dignity (307). Through the telling of tales, the "big talkers" of Eatonville (that is to say the "porch talkers") invent and embellish tales that transform them from ordinary people into artists (Vickers 309).

Further, in "Ebonics As Cultural Resistance," Charles Green and Ian Isidore Smart contend, "Language is the quintessential ingredient of culture" (521). Having been enslaved from various regions across West Africa and then exported to the United States

(and throughout North America), Africans who became slaves spoke hundreds of different languages. They were separated from their tribes and their families, often before being forced to embark on the middle passage and certainly by the time slaves headed for America reached southern plantations. Learning to communicate with their new brothers and sisters in slavery was survival: a new language had to be created. This language was created from the English of their new “home” in combining their West African mother tongues, varied and diverse.

Across the African diaspora, according to Mervyn Alleyne in Comparative Afro-American: An Historical-Comparative Study of English Based Afro-American Dialects in the New World, structural forms of language and vocabulary that can be traced back to West African languages exist on a scale. At one end of the scale, West African languages are found nearly wholly intact (such as in Surinam and the Sea Islands--which stretch along the coasts of the Carolinas to the Georgia-Florida border, where Gullah is spoken); in the middle of this scale similar syntactic structures and close vocabulary derivatives are found (such as those from Jamaica, Antigua and Guyana); and finally at the farthest end of the scale a residual presence of West African languages is found, such as those in the modern vernacular of black Americans (18-9). With regard to the modern vernacular of black Americans, Alleyne says:

If we can show that deviances from mainstream English still found in language forms among [...] Black[s] are relatable to forms in so-called “Creole” languages, these latter being derivable [...] from West African languages, then it would perhaps be possible to consider the former, at least historically, as residual forms which have not yet undergone

extinction or have resisted extinction [...] in the process of movement along the [language] scale. (19)

If black vernacular speech can, in fact, be attributed to a language pattern combining the English that slaves learned upon their arrival in America and residual West African languages, then the type of speech used by Hurston's characters affirms their link to their ancestral homeland.

For example, Alleyne provides the primary consonant sounds of West African languages, which include *t, p, d, b, k, g, m, n, f, w, j* and *h* and sounds for combinations of the consonants *kw, gw, mb, nd* and *tj*; but there is no provision for the sound the combination of the letters *th* makes (76). Rather, the letter *d* is substituted for *th*, a practice which is prevalent in all of the dialogue in Hurston's work: "Between de beans and de dice Ah can't lose. Ah'm gone right now tuh pick me uh job uh work wid de best man on de muck" (THEIR EYES 123-4).

Further, Jamaican English, which is closer on the language scale to West African language than it is to English, uses the word *im* for *him* and uses *fi* instead of *for* (dropping the final *r* consonant) (Alleyne 72-76; 153). After his purchase of Matt Bonner's mule, Starks says: "Didn't buy 'im fuh no work. I god, Ah bought dat varmint tuh let 'im rest. You didn't have gumption enough tuh do it" (THEIR EYES 54). Starks' use of the word *dat* instead of *that*, his dropping of the *h* before the word *him* and his dropping of the final consonant in the word *for* (*fuh*) could be construed as a language pattern combining the English of the New World and remnants of West African language patterns brought to the New World by African Americans' slave ancestors.

According to Green and Smart, “Alleyne and others have conclusively established the West African roots of New World Creoles and hence of the New World Black Vernaculars,” and the development of black vernacular has been an essential form of resistance (525). Calling black vernacular by its controversial term, *Ebonics*, Green and Smart argue that today’s youth, “overcome by feelings of their own powerlessness...have in Ebonics a symbol of control” (521).

From this perspective the dialogue in Their Eyes is then a symbol of control and not, as Wright originally contended in 1937, a “minstrel show technique that makes the ‘white folk’ laugh” (Wright qtd. in Corse and Griffin, 178). Therefore, examined outside of the confines of white stereotypes about black culture, the storytelling and black vernacular dialogue in Their Eyes is a nod to the oral tradition of Hurston’s characters’ ancestors and a means by which to privilege African-centered ideals over European traditions and norms.

In “What White Publishers Won’t Print,” Hurston wrote, “For various reasons, the average, struggling, non-morbid Negro is the best kept secret in America. His revelation to the public is the thing needed to do away with that feeling of difference which inspires fear and which ever expresses itself in dislike” (I LOVE 173). Hurston’s sentiment echoes Emecheta’s assertion that writing about the human condition is the only way to subvert “false ideologies” that engender inequities; therefore, contrary to Weldon and Wright’s opinions about her, Hurston indicates that in highlighting the lives of “average, struggling, non-morbid Negroes,” she is, in fact, being revolutionary in portraying her characters authentically.

Central to Their Eyes is Janie's desire to live authentically and become self-actualized regardless of others' expectations. Whereas Janie's desire to become self-actualized is largely individualistic, Hurston was self-actualized in a way that made her interdependent with her African heritage (her ancestral community). In In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, Alice Walker illuminates Hurston's black pride and connection to "things African," writing that "Zora was interested in Africa, Haiti, Jamaica [...] (85). Hurston was known to "wrap her head in scarves as black women in Africa, Haiti and everywhere else had done for centuries [...] [she] loved to dance" (88). Walker also comments that Hurston's early work "shows that she grew up pitying whites because the ones she saw lacked 'light' and soul" (86).

Based on her upbringing and her academic and cultural fascination with Africa and the Caribbean, it is likely Hurston did not much concern herself conforming to white ideals and achieving a measure of equality or power based on white political and social structures. In her non-conformist approach to writing, she also did not seem to concern herself with how her writing would aid or hinder the ascendance of African-Americans through the ranks of white institutions, choosing instead to celebrate the African heritage that had been repressed by white institutions. Therefore, it was not just her exploration of the oral tradition through the storytelling and black vernacular dialogue of her characters in her work that made Wright, Johnson and other critics uncomfortable: it was also her incorporation of folkloric and what might be considered supernatural or spiritual elements—such as talking animals—into her work that made her black male contemporaries concerned that white critics would read the work and dismiss it, thereby dismissing the work of other black writers of the time.

A notable component of folklore is the use of animals to carry parts of the tale. The story of Matt Bonner's mule in Their Eyes does exactly what animal tales in the African folkloric tradition are to do: "amuse, entertain, provide explanations and, frequently, as an obvious or subtle parable, comment on human foibles and values" (Courlander 302). The story of Matt Bonner's mule could be seen as a parable for human compassion, as well as a vehicle for showing Starks' complexity as a character--desiring Janie's love and approval but unable, or at least unwilling, to honor her and treat her well. In the story of the mule, Bonner is the chief antagonist, his cruelty marring him with the inability to control his speech when agitated, and Janie is the compassionate protagonist who desires mercy for the mule. Starks is the deliverer of mercy, the only one to have heard Janie's disgust over the way the mule was treated and the only one with means and control enough to wrest the useless mule from the clutches of Matt Bonner.

According to Courlander, the animal tale in African folklore is "important as a carrier of deeply rooted attitudes about what is good and proper and what is not" (302). After Starks liberates the mule from Bonner, Janie stands and says:

Freein' dat mule makes uh mighty big man outa you. Something like George Washington and Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln, he had de whole United States to rule so he freed de Negroes. You got uh town so you freed uh mule. You have tuh have power tuh free things and dat makes you lak uh king uh something. (55)

The mule story, then, also communicates the importance of freedom and the responsibility that those in power have to ensure freedom. Thus the mule story carries an important message about what is "good and proper."



The story of the mule also provides the one instance in the novel where Janie is lauded as an orator, having put “jus’ de right words tuh” the thoughts of the town (55). Since Janie is the chief storyteller, the novel itself the story of her life that she recounts to her friend, it is significant that the mule story, rich in African tradition, is the vehicle by which Hurston allows Janie’s voice to be heard by the town. Further, Janie’s storytelling fosters a sense of community, which makes this passage both African-centered and womanist.

The story of the mule concludes with its death and funeral. After all of the townspeople leave the site where they put the mule to rest, the vultures, which have been circling the mule finally descend upon it. The Parson of the flock balances on the mule and asks the chorus of the flock, “What killed this man?” A lyrical exchange between the Parson and the flock of vultures follows, before the Parson picks out the eyes of the mule and the flock feasts on its remains. In this passage, Hurston gives animals the gift of speech, which would be considered supernatural at best and nonsensical at worst in a traditional Western context, yet talking animals are as normal in West African culture as talking to and interacting with spirits. By incorporating these elements into Their Eyes, Hurston honors West African spirituality by allowing these spiritual elements to serve as a backdrop for Janie’s progress toward self-actualization.

Hurston’s approach to Their Eyes allowed her to assert herself as the self-actualized black woman she was: she pursued through her writing that which interested her, irrespective of the accepted trends in black writing during the Harlem Renaissance. Janie mirrored Hurston’s self-actualization in that she chose to pursue life and love in ways that were satisfying to her regardless of how she was perceived. For this reason,

Their Eyes departs from the African-centered ideal that self-actualization is interdependent with notions of the community. The community routinely ostracized Janie for being an individual, and, rather than adapt her behavior to make her pursuit of self-actualization serve a greater community good, she chose to disregard community ideals. Whereas her affair with Tea Cake was misunderstood by Phoeby and others in Eatonville, Janie defended her relationship:

Janie, everybody's talkin' bout how dat Tea Cake is draggin' you round tuh places you ain't used tuh. Baseball games and huntin' and fishin'. He don't know you'se ueseter uh more high time crowd dan dat. You always did class off.

Jody classed me off. Ah didn't. Naw, Phoeby, Tea Cake ain't draggin me off nowhere Ah don't want tuh go [...].

But, Janie, Tea Cake, whilst he ain't no jail-bird, he ain't got uh dime tuh cry. Ain't you skeered he's jes after yo' money—him bein' younger than you?

He ain't never ast de first penny from me yet [...]. (THEIR EYES 107)

Janie not only deviates from community ideals in her relationship with Tea Cake, but also in never experiencing motherhood. In this way, Janie differs from characters in novels by Aidoo, Emecheta and many African-American women authors who may problematize motherhood but still arrange characters' self-exploration around it. Janie's disregard for the community both in her self-focused pursuit of self-actualization and her not embracing the ideals of motherhood (whether biologically or metaphorically, as

discussed in subsequent chapters) mirrors Esi in Changes and make her more of a witch (as per West African definitions) than the protagonists of African-American women authors, like Toni Morrison, who followed Hurston.

## CHAPTER 5

### LOCATING SONG OF SOLOMON IN AN AFRICAN-CENTERED WOMANIST FRAMEWORK

Of all African-American women writers, Toni Morrison is perhaps the most critically acclaimed, widely studied and most obviously African-centered. Much of her work, most notably Beloved and Song of Solomon, contains not only the signposts of the African-centered womanist framework proposed herein for evaluating African-American women's narratives, but also additional African-rich symbolism. In her essay, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison discusses her use of the oral tradition: "To make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken—to have the reader *feel* the narrator without *identifying* the narrator, or hearing him or her knock about, and to have the reader work *with* the author in the construction of the book—is what's important" (341). She also discusses the way she blends black people's view of spirituality in her work both with regard to magic, or the supernatural, and with regard to reverence for ancestors. Of her use of magic, she says:

But within that practicality [of black people] we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two worlds together at the same time

was enhancing, not limiting. And some of those things were ‘discredited knowledge’ that Black people had; discredited only because Black people were discredited, therefore what they *knew* was ‘discredited.’ And also because the press toward upward social mobility would mean to get as far away from that knowledge as possible. That kind of knowledge has a very strong place in my work. (342)

Of her incorporation of an ancestor in her work and that of other African-American writers, Morrison says:

[It] seems to me interesting to evaluate Black literature on what the writer does with the presence of the ancestor [...] [A]ncestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships with the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom [...]. [S]olace [for characters in novels by Black writers] comes not from the contemplation of serene nature as in a lot of mainstream white literature [...] Whether the character was in Harlem or Arkansas [...] this timelessness was there, this person who represented this ancestor [...]. When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself. (343-4)

Finally, Morrison has a keen understanding of how the self is interdependent with the community and with the larger political sphere. She says:

If anything I do [...] isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the

obligation of my personal dreams--which is to say yes, the work must be political. (344)

In each of these descriptions of her work, Morrison locates herself and her novels in an African-centered womanist framework that privileges the oral tradition and African notions of spirituality and that concerns itself with exploring self-actualization while upholding the importance of community. Further, she incorporates a variety of African symbols in her work to more firmly ground it in an African-centered context. Morrison sets the tone of the African-ness of her novel Song of Solomon early in the text when the protagonist's mother, Ruth, takes comfort in a large water mark on her mahogany dining table:

She never set the table or passed by the dining room without looking at it [...] She knew it was there, would always be there, but needed to confirm its presence. Like the keeper of the lighthouse and the prisoner, she regarded it as a mooring, a checkpoint, some stable visual object that assured her that the world was still there; that this life was not a dream. (SONG 11)

Through this passage early in the book, we learn that Ruth regards herself as a prisoner in her house and that the water mark on the dining room table gives her hope. The significance of the water mark, and not some other object, as symbolic of hope is that water is symbolic of Africa in works by African-American writers. According to Anissa Wardi's "Inscriptions in the Dust: 'A Gathering of Old Men' and Beloved in Ancestral Requiems," references to water serve as a marker for the "designation of the 'original place' [and] suggest a shared historic origin, beginning with the Middle Passage" (36).

By this logic, use of water imagery is a metaphor for the Middle Passage, linking the novels' characters and, in this passage, Ruth, to their "original place."

In addition to the African symbolism Morrison weaves through Song of Solomon, the novel privileges orality. Yvonne Atkinson claims, "[T]he oral tradition of Black English is the foundation of Morrison's work" (12). Although Atkinson characterizes Morrison's work as resting on the foundation of "Black English," the reasons for her privileging of orality stems from her desire to frame her and her characters' African ancestry in her texts. Like African women writers who struggle with the "problem" of language and its "correct" use in novels, according to Atkinson, ultimately, "Morrison's fiction dismisses the issues of the correctness of the language, but focuses intensively on the community bonding and artistry evident in the language" (12). Thus, the belief that the oral tradition guided by the cultural marker of language is inextricably linked to communal ideals, a theme that appears in the fiction of Aidoo and Emecheta, is also a signpost of Morrison's work.

Additionally, Morrison uses memory as a way to link her novel and its characters to the oral tradition. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi grounds this notion in Yoruba and Igbo beliefs:

The Yoruba refer to the denizen [...] born again, as abiku; the Igbo call the living icon ogbanje [...] Since abiku/ogbanje evokes the past, with its separations and instability, the concept can serve as a springboard for examining issues of memory [...] that link West Africa with the Americas.  
(663)

Finally, in Song of Solomon, "Morrison uses language to define those who are a

part of their community and those who are not” (Atkinson 19). Whereas Macon Dead is clearly positioned as an outsider, his sister, Pilate, is the center of her community and is characterized as one “who has the knowledge of communal mores, who is a reliable storyteller, and--crucially--who has the power of the word, nommo” (Atkinson 20). According to Alexander-Floyd and Simien, nommo, or “self-naming” represents significant power because “[I]n African culture, self-definition serves as the basis for collective action and individual identity” (70). It is no coincidence that the gift of nommo bestowed upon Pilate by Morrison is not the only Africanized feature she embodies.

Pilate, described by Dorothy Lee as a “primal mother goddess” (357), lives on the outskirts of town in a home with no running water or electricity, much as rural African women live, and she shares a home with her daughter and grand-daughter (and thus is the living ancestor of a matrilineal clan of women). In one passage when Milkman and Guitar go to Pilate’s home to steal what they think is a bag of gold, the scene is described as the two men “breathing air that could have come from a marketplace in Accra” (SONG 185). At this moment, when Guitar and Milkman stand near Pilate’s house, prepared to rob her, Morrison juxtaposes Pilate’s African-ness with her nephew’s Western-centered materialism. In this passage, Milkman might be characterized as a witch, or one who has succumbed to the selfish, materialistic pursuits of the West over the community-focused pursuit of the greater social good that Pilate--the most African character in the text--embodies. It is not just Milkman, but members of the community as a whole who have shut themselves off from their African roots in favor of Western ideals. Morrison describes the dislocation of the community from its African roots in the passage



just before Milkman and Guitar break into Pilate's home:

Yet there was this heavy spice-sweet smell that made you think of the East and striped tents and the *sha-sha-sha* of leg bracelets. The people who lived near the lake hadn't noticed that smell for a long time now because when air conditioners came, they shut their windows and slept a light surface sleep under the motor's drone. (SONG 184)

The phrase "sha-sha-sha of leg bracelets" reiterates the oral (and thus African) quality of the passage, which is linked to its content: the horror of the materialistic Westernized witch who is preparing to steal from his ancestor for self-gain. Like her African contemporaries, Morrison links the oral structure of her narrative with its content in that both structure and content emphasize the importance of community.

The relationship between Pilate and Milkman serves as both the catalyst for the development of the African-ness of Milkman's identity and the barometer by which the extent of his development is measured. From his first interaction with his aunt, when he was eleven years old he has been completely entranced by her:

Milkman was five feet seven then but it was the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy. He was with his friend, an older boy--wise and kind and fearless. He was sitting comfortably in the notorious wine house; he was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud. And he was in love. No wonder his father was afraid of them. (SONG 47)

This passage incorporates a variety of elements that speak to the African-centeredness of the text. Milkman finds a sense of community he feels not just with his

friend, Guitar, but also in the company of his aunt and cousins. Through this sense of community, not only does he feel pure joy for the first time in his young life, but this sense of joy leaves him hungry for further exploration and foreshadows the journey toward self-actualization that he begins on the day he first visits Pilate. The sentiment “No wonder his father was afraid of them” implies that the women have a power that is beyond the comprehension of Westernized men. In fact, the women are themselves self-actualized (Pilate undoubtedly and Reba and Hagar in varying degrees), which is not supernatural but seems so to Milkman because his mother and sisters are completely imprisoned in Westernized ideals that keep them from “laughing out loud.” This passage sets the tone for Pilate and Milkman’s relationship: throughout the novel he looks to her as a guide in his search for identity. She serves as his chi until he abandons his Westernized mentality to the extent that he can discern his own chi.

Milkman’s journey is organized around the myth of Solomon, the enslaved African ancestor who is said to have leapt from a cliff and flown back to Africa. Milkman’s maturity is contingent upon his finding out who he is by figuring out from whom--and from where--he is descended. Along his journey, he is encouraged by Pilate, his spiritual mother and the embodiment of African ideals, but he is thwarted by his father, Macon, the embodiment of witchcraft.

Macon is the son of a freed African slave and a light-skinned woman who “looked like a white woman” (SONG 54). Because Macon’s father was a landowner in the racist south, angry white southerners killed him, having shot him “five feet into the air” to steal his land (SONG 52). After he was killed, Macon and Pilate fled first to where the midwife who delivered them, Circe, worked as a servant for white people. They stayed with

her for two weeks before fleeing into the Georgia woods in an attempt to head toward Virginia. As they made their way through the woods, they continued to see “a man that looked just like their father” (SONG 168):

All day long at various intervals they saw him: staring down into duck ponds, framed by the Y of a sycamore tree; shading his eyes from the sun as he peered over a rock at the wide valley floor beneath them. Each time they saw him they backed off and went in the opposite direction. Now the land itself, the only one they knew and knew intimately began to terrify them. (SONG 168)

This avoidance of their father’s spirit ultimately led them to a cave where they could safely stay. His interaction with them as they journeyed signaled their first interaction with spirits, a phenomenon that Pilate would continue to encounter throughout her life and that Macon would not, evidence of his lack of connection with his African-ness and Pilate’s connection to hers.

While in the cave, Macon killed a white man sleeping there, because the sight of the white man reminded him how “his father’s body had twitched and danced for whole minutes in the dirt” after he was shot (SONG 169). After Macon killed him, he found a stash of gold that he wanted to take but that Pilate cautioned him against. They fought over it and Macon left the cave. When he returned, the gold and Pilate were gone, leading Macon to believe that Pilate had deceived him and taken the gold, despite her earlier admonishment against their taking it.

Macon believes “Money is freedom [...] the only real freedom there is” (SONG 163), and, years later, when Macon reveals his version of the story of his and Pilate’s

estrangement, he becomes so excited at the prospect that Pilate still has the gold that he instructs Milkman to retrieve it from her house: “He turned to his son full face and licked his lips. ‘Macon, get it and you can have half of it; go wherever you want. Get it. For both of us. Please get it, son. Get the gold’” (SONG 172). This exchange with Milkman demonstrates that Macon has been so seduced by Western values that he believes his sister, to whom he was closer than anyone in the world, betrayed him for money. This belief that Pilate betrayed him is so strong and he is so materialistic that he encourages his son to break into Pilate’s house and steal from her.

Contrary to Macon’s belief that the sack hanging in Pilate’s house is the gold she stole from the white man he killed in the cave, the sack holds the bones of Macon and Pilate’s father. She had returned to the south three years after she and Macon left to retrieve his bones because he had told her to do so. Pilate tells Milkman and Guitar: “‘I went cause Papa told me to. He kept coming to see me off and on. Tell me things to do [...] he came and told me outright: ‘You can’t just fly off and leave a body,’ he tole me’” (SONG 208). Pilate’s value system and interaction with her dead father further substantiate her ongoing connection to her ancestry and the traditional beliefs it embodies. Pilate embodies the African-centeredness of the text not only through the expression of her values, but also in the sense that she is characterized as dualistic: Macon calls Pilate a snake, which is symbolic of the python founder of the Venda people. According to Venda legend, the python separated itself into two snakes that each founded a people. One founded the land of the Venda, which was “fertile and full of rivers and springs” (Courlander 436). The other snake founded the land of the Ronga people, which was plagued with drought and famine. When the two snakes, each separate ends of the

python, came across one another, they instantly rejoined and left their people for the forest. Pilate, then, is representative of two peoples--one whose culture is barren of community traditions because they have been lost in the pursuit of material gain (the European) and one whose culture is rich in community and spiritual traditions (the African)--and she exploits her ability to adapt to either aspect of her dualistic personality when needed.

For example, when Milkman steals Pilate's bag of bones thinking it is a sack of gold, he is arrested. Pilate bails him out of jail, and when she does, she assumes the role of the obedient, timid black woman rather than the powerful African she is so as not to overwhelm the white officers with her commanding presence. Of Pilate in the police station Milkman says, "She even changed her voice...She didn't even look the same. She looked short. Short and pitiful" (SONG 205). This description of Pilate is contrary to every other characterization of her in the novel, but she knows that in order to free Milkman, she needs to adapt to the circumstances.

Beyond representing the Venda/Ronga snakes, Pilate also embodies the brand of feminism that Aidoo and Emecheta uphold in their texts--a strong woman who places the importance of being a mother over her immediate self-interest. This allows Pilate to embody the African-ness of the text and represent its womanist focus. Although Pilate is not Milkman's mother, she is his spiritual mother in that she is responsible for connecting him to his African ancestry. As such, she sacrifices her pride by adapting her persona to defer to the white officers to free Milkman.

Shortly after Milkman's arrest, he sets off on a journey south to retrieve the gold he believes is still in the cave where Pilate left it. The journey is precipitated by the

tension that builds in his and Guitar's friendship. As Guitar becomes more militant and violent in his quest to work toward racial equality, he becomes consumed with the idea of the gold that they were to steal from Pilate. Consequently, their friendship ultimately also symbolizes the decimation of African communities that began with the introduction of the slave trade and a cash economy in West Africa.

As the novel progresses, a desire to kill Milkman overtakes Guitar because he believes Milkman's self-absorption obfuscates his understanding of the importance of fighting for racial equality. Paradoxically, Guitar's violence against Milkman is parallel to the descent into violence to which West African warlords succumbed when whites bribed them with Western riches to hunt down and enslave their brothers. The hunt near the close of the novel, wherein Milkman believes he is participating as a hunter but quickly finds out he is the one hunted, symbolizes the hunt of African men by other African men who were aiding white enslavers in their capture.

At the beginning of Milkman's journey south he is after the gold, hoping to avoid being killed by Guitar and the Seven Days if he does not find it; however, his quest becomes a journey for his own identity. He first sets out to find Circe, the mid-wife who delivered Pilate and Macon and hid them after the white men killed their father, who he hopes will tell him where to find the cave of Pilate's and Milkman's stories. When he finds Circe, he sees that she is "So old she was colorless" (SONG 240). Circe's timelessness and the mystical circumstances in which she lives (with a pack of Weimaraners with gold eyes, for example) allow her to function as a spiritual figure because it is ambiguous whether she is truly still living or a spirit still inhabiting her

mistress' home. Milkman's interaction with her symbolizes the West African spiritual tenet that the living interacting with spirits in everyday life.

While talking to Circe, he learns more about his grandfather and his grandmother and the general location of the cave. When he reaches the cave after an arduous trek through the woods that still surround it, there is no gold. Despite his disappointment, his attitude begins to change: "There wasn't any gold, but now he knew all the fine reasons for wanting it didn't mean a thing [...] imagining what going home would be like now...his mind began to function clearly" (SONG 257). He begins to believe that Pilate has taken the gold to Virginia so he decides to "follow [...] in her tracks" (SONG 258), but the tracks he would follow were not to the gold but rather to his heritage and identity. In Shalimar, Virginia, he hears children singing the song that tells the story of his great-grandfather who was said to have jumped off a cliff to fly back to Africa:

*Jake the only son of Solomon...*

*Whirled about and touched the sun...*

*Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone*

*Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home. (SONG 303)*

Hearing the song inspires him to track down the rest of the story from people nearby who might be able to enlighten him. As he learns more about his heritage, he becomes more and more free:

'I need the sea! The whole goddamn sea!' [...] He began to whoop and dive and splash and turn. 'He could fly!' [...] He whipped the water with his fists, then jumped straight up as though he too could take of, and

landed on his back and sank down, his mouth and eyes full of water [...]

‘That tribe. That flyin motherfuckin tribe. Oh, man!’ (SONG 327-8)

According to Dorothy Lee, during Milkman’s “long and circuitous journey,” he reconnects to his own African-ness: not only does “he learn [...] to relate to nature and to sustain himself in the woods without the useless trinkets of modern society,” but he “abandons evasion and vanity...ponders the need for responsibility to others [...] [and] Symbolically, he is divested of his ego” (Lee 354).

His abandonment of his selfish ego and insight into his obligation to his community allow him to gain the knowledge of his ancestry (he is a son of Solomon) and in turn inherit the power of flight. In the final scene of the novel, Milkman is fully self-actualized because he has become connected to his ancestry and community.

Paradoxically, by forfeiting his egotistical ambitions Milkman discovers his true self and reaches a higher level of consciousness, symbolized by his final flight.

According to Dorothy Lee, Song of Solomon asks the reader to “acquire an awareness of false standards of evaluation,” (359) a notion that echoes Emecheta’s sentiment that “cultural beliefs, based upon false ideologies, show themselves in the course of lived experience to be ultimately only means of justifying power inequities” (Wehrs 187). This central focus of Song of Solomon aligns it more closely with the intent of African women’s fiction than that of any other group. Pilate is a key symbol of the novel’s African-ness and female-ness, and while she is not a biological mother, she nurtures Milkman’s self-actualization and fosters a sense of community among her female descendants and in her neighborhood. Morrison also characterizes Pilate as a



storyteller and a powerful ancestor. With all of these attributes, Pilate is very much like Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, the protagonist of her novel of the same name.

## CHAPTER 6

### LOCATING MAMA DAY IN AN AFRICAN-CENTERED WOMANIST FRAMEWORK

One of the chief conflicts in Ama Ata Aidoo's Changes is balancing motherhood, a critically important position in West African society, and self-actualization. In the West African Akan society (which originates in what is now known as Ghana), motherhood is the supreme nurturing state of being, not just in the sense of nurturing children, but of nurturing an entire community--an entire people. According to David Wehrs, the right of children to be nursed by their mothers "extends itself metaphorically to the right of humans to nurture [...] At the heart of this system is the notion that maternal ethical care is the precondition--materially, psychologically, socially--for the next generation's ethical disposition and activity" (142).

In Changes, Aidoo juxtaposes Esi and Nana as two extremes of motherhood. Esi ignores her daughter so that she may nurture her career and is, consequently, characterized as selfish, whereas Nana's take on motherhood is so selfless that she undermines any form of individual self-actualization for women. Aidoo's implication is that either extreme is insufficient. Whereas Aidoo's narrative indicates the importance of motherhood in West African society in that it is through mothers that entire communities are not only born but also nurtured into being (socially, psychologically, etc.), Aidoo's

novel also insists that self-actualization is critical for women (including mothers) so that they can have the well-being and strength to nurture children and communities successfully.

In Changes, Opukuya represents a better balance between motherhood and self-actualization than Esi. Opukuya is “clever enough to recognize the structures of oppression, but ultimately unwilling to allow [herself] to be bewitched” by Westernized notions of materialism (witchcraft) and, thus, embodies a self that is “inseparable from a maternal, sociable care for a future beyond and larger than” a strictly “personal future” (Wehrs 168).

In Naylor’s Mama Day, Mama Day could have been modeled after Aidoo’s Opukuya. According to Amy K. Levin in “Metaphor and Maternity in *Mama Day*,” Mama Day’s surrogate motherhood of the Willow Springs community can be attributed to West African values:

[A]s the ruling matriarch of the Day family and island community of Willow Springs, as healer, advisor, midwife and conjurer par excellence, the old woman offers a model of mothering based not on biological kinship or the Freudian reading of the nuclear family, but on female solidarity and a vision of women’s leadership that can be traced to West African women’s traditions. (70)

As Levin suggests, Mama Day’s maternal qualities are substantial enough to encompass the whole of Willow Springs--rendering her the metaphorical mother of the entire community; these maternal qualities originate in West African traditions that privilege feminine power and solidarity. Thus, Mama Day’s ability to effectively nurture her

community (as mother figure) is linked inextricably to her African-ness. Additionally, like Opukuya in *Changes*, Mama Day is a mid-wife (work she does to sustain herself and her community) and is, in a sense, “Everybody’s mama now” (MAMA DAY 89).

Naylor’s characterization of motherhood demonstrates self-actualization, rather than an oppressive state of being, as it is often presented in Western, feminist literature.

The setting of *Mama Day* also contributes to the development of the theme that motherhood links self-actualization and community health. According to Margaret Creel, “many of the Gola slaves brought to the coastal areas of South Carolina belonged to Sande [...] a society of women [...] [that] offers a model of maternity that is based not solely on biological kinship (or even the duties Western society associates with mothering), but on seniority and earned respect” (Levin 74). Mama Day fits the profile of a Sande Soweï, or leader, in that she is not a biological mother but a woman whose “power is directly attributable to her knowledge of society secrets from which other members are excluded” (Levin 75).

Mama Day’s connection to the Other Place and to the Days’ powerful female ancestor, Sapphira, suggests her ability to be considered a Soweï. Her connection to and interactions with Sapphira throughout the novel add yet another Africanized component to the text in that part of Mama Day’s self-actualization arises from her strong identity as a daughter of Sapphira, who is described as “the great great grand, mother” (MAMA DAY 218). According to David Cowart, this characterization of Sapphira “suggest[s] at once Sapphira Wade and something older, more powerful, and truly divine [...] [the] incarnation of Nana Buruku [from the West African Fon society who is] nothing less than absolutely black” (451-2).

Sapphira's goddess-like image is preserved and passed down through the mother-line of the generations on Willow Springs, giving girls a legacy of womanhood that embodies strength, irreverence and an intelligence that reaches beyond Eurocentric interpretations and draws on African connotations, which include knowledge of the unseen, as well as the seen. Sapphira is embodied in Mama Day as the ancestor with whom the women in the Day family identify and from whom they draw strength.

Sapphira's female descendants' ability to trace their heritage to her is critical in their development of their sense of self (and their identification with their African heritage). In Mama Day, we see the intact relationship with a strong mother ancestor. The knowledge of ancestry (and its African-ness) fosters the early development of a strong sense of self and paves the way for daughters to become strong biological or, in the case of Mama Day, symbolic mother figures. The power of the African-identified foremother paves the way for self-actualized daughters firmly grounded in their womanist and African identities and their obligations to their community. In characterizing Mama Day in the way she does, as well as in developing the sub-plot of a strong female ancestor whose spirit guides Mama Day, Naylor links self-actualization to community solidarity against a backdrop of spirituality.

Beyond the characterization of motherhood and presence of an ancestor, an additional way that Naylor privileges African-centeredness is by privileging the oral tradition through the expression of "village" humor and vernacular in the sections of the novel that take place in Willow Springs. Daryl Dance describes "village" humor as that which illustrates and privileges the cultural signifiers that contribute to marginalization (xxiv-xxvii). In privileging these signifiers, authors subvert the power of their intention

(making these signifiers a source of empowerment rather than shame) and, through this subversion, produce comic effect.

One example of village humor in Mama Day occurs when the unnamed narrator tells the story of “Reema’s boy,” who went off to college and returned to Willow Springs to gather folklore:

We was polite enough [...] there weren’t nothing we could do but take pity on him as he rattled on about ‘ethnography,’ ‘unique speech patterns,’ ‘cultural preservation,’ and whatever else he seemed to getting so much pleasure out of while talking into his little gray machine [...] There was enough fun in that to take us through the fall and winter when he hauled himself back over The Sound to wherever he was getting what was supposed to be passing for an education. (7)

In describing the anthropological pursuits of “Reema’s boy,” Naylor pokes fun at his attempts to intellectualize Willow Springs’ culture, thus privileging the community’s Africanized traditions over higher education (which, in the context of this novel, serves as a signpost of witchcraft--the West’s oppressive, materialistic dominance). By valuing cultural traditions and turning a skeptical eye toward higher education, Naylor offers a sense of empowerment for a sector of society that would otherwise be marginalized by the dominant culture for their lack of education. In this way, Naylor uses humor to both unify the community and establish preference for African-centered values. This example of “village” humor also serves as an example of *Mama Day*’s use of vernacular: “We was polite enough...there weren’t nothing we could do but take pity on him.” Naylor’s use of

vernacular ties the community to its African heritage, exemplifying that the use of the oral tradition in Mama Day is both African-centered and womanist.

In Mama Day, for the sections of the novel that take place in Willow Springs, the narrator takes on the persona of the characters of the island by adopting speech patterns to match those used by Mama Day, Abigail, Dr. Buzzard and the other islanders, who use vernacular, sensory imagery and other signposts of the oral tradition:

This year is gonna be a good one, 'cause the weather's held and there ain't no rain. The older heads can bring out their real candles, insisting that's the way it was done in the beginning. They often take exception to the younger folks who will use kerosene lamps or sparklers, rain or no rain.

They say it's a lot more pleasant than worrying about hot wax dropping on your hands. (MAMA DAY 110)

By contrast, many sections of the novel are narrated by George, the Westernized husband of Cocoa, Mama Day's granddaughter: "George's background is the antithesis of Willow Springs; an orphan, he knows little about his kin. His last name, inherited from the benefactor of the orphanage where he grew up, indicates no blood ties" (Levin 79).

Throughout these sections, George avoids black vernacular, opting for the English that illustrates his traditionally educated, Westernized background.

The climax of the novel occurs when George's Westernized way of being inhibits his ability to believe in the unseen world, a lack of belief that contributes to his death.

According to Levin, "[George's] scientific, rationalistic bias has failed to prepare him for the mystical nature of knowledge in Willow Springs" (79)--a knowledge that George finds unbelievable but that, for Mama Day, represents actual psychological experiences.

George's death is symbolic of the spiritual death of African-Americans who deny their African ancestry in favor of chasing the witchcraft of the West. In this respect, George is similar to Aidoo's Esi, who favored her career over her daughter, and ultimately brought shame to her community because of her failure as a mother--the most highly privileged role in Akan society.

The tension between George's belief system and Mama Day's confirms that the text can be effectively located in an African-centered womanist framework. In Mama Day, Naylor demonstrates the "futility of the white world's attempts to control [...] the decidedly black world of Willow Springs" and further articulates "the futility of using white artistic forms to express reality across the bridge" (Meisenhelder 406).

Meisenhelder's assertion that white artistic forms are useless to express reality in Willow Springs parallels the notion that Eurocentric critical theory is insufficient for the evaluation of Mama Day, and, by extension, works by other African-American women, such as Hurston, Morrison and Walker. As Naylor does in Mama Day, Alice Walker uses motherhood to explore self-actualization and community in The Color Purple.



## CHAPTER 7

### LOCATING THE COLOR PURPLE IN AN AFRICAN-CENTERED WOMANIST FRAMEWORK

Alice Walker's The Color Purple is a story of how Celie, the central character, achieves self-actualization in a time and society that makes this achievement a rare feat. Although The Color Purple is written in epistolary form, paradoxically, there is an oral quality to the work: Celie writes as she talks rather than in elevated English that would ordinarily characterize traditional Western novels in the epistolary form. By contrast, like Hurston, Walker allows the vernacular to manifest itself in Celie's writing and produces discourse that is meandering, a quality that Morrison claims exemplifies the oral tradition. Beyond the oral tradition, the novel demonstrates other themes that allow it to be evaluated in an African-centered womanist context.

At the beginning of the novel, Celie is a young girl who has lost her mother and is repeatedly raped by her father. Her father sells her into marriage, much as fathers did (and in some societies still do) in some African societies. In Celie's case, she is given to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ when she is fourteen years old and is, in effect, sold into slavery as his wife. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ asks to marry Celie's sister, Nettie, but their father says, "I can't let you have Nettie [...] But I can let you have Celie [...] She ugly [...] But she ain't no stranger to hard work [...] You can do everything like you want to [...]" (COLOR 7-8).

Once she is given to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Celie goes from being beaten and raped by her father to being beaten and raped by her husband. Her role is to tend to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s children from a previous relationship, cook, clean and work his fields. Her saving grace is her sister, who comes to live with Celie, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and the children after running away from their father's house because she "had to git out, maybe fine help for the other little ones" (COLOR 16). Whereas Celie is down-trodden and hopeless, believing that she is worthless as a human being, Nettie is cheerful and hopeful. Further, Nettie, who has had the opportunity to attend school, begins to teach Celie to read. However, just as the girls begin to settle into their lives in Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s house, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ forces Nettie out of the home for refusing his advances. Nettie's departure sends Celie into a spiral of despair.

Celie's letters to God following Nettie's departure convey her hopelessness and despondence: "I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive" (COLOR 17). Although Celie's despair is punctuated by Nettie's departure, it originates in not having a mother to nurture, guide and protect her. Celie's mother died "screaming and cussing" her (COLOR 2). Again, as Wehrs says, in Akan culture, "maternal ethical care is the precondition--materially, psychologically, socially--for the next generation's ethical disposition and activity" (142). Because Celie's disposition is shattered by not having received maternal care, she has no sense of self in the beginning of the novel. This violent loss of her mother coupled with the physical and emotional abuse and rape she has suffered, results in what Leonard Shengold calls "soul murder":

Soul, or psychic, murder involves trauma imposed from the world outside the mind that is so overwhelming that the mental apparatus is flooded with

feeling [...]. What happens to the child subjected to soul murder is so terrible, so overwhelming, and usually so recurrent that the child must not feel it and cannot register it, and resorts to a massive isolation of feeling, which is maintained by brainwashing [...] a hypnotic state of living deadness [...]. (qtd. in Proudfit 19-20)

Until Shug Avery enters her life, Celie remains hopeless; however as Celie's relationship with Shug evolves, Shug functions not only as Celie's lover, but also as a mother figure. In fact, Proudfit attributes Celie's ultimate transcendence of the traumatic events of her past in part to her having "ma[d]e use of several nurturing surrogate mother figures, foremost among whom is 'the Queen Honeybee' herself, Shug Avery [...]" (21). According to Proudfit:

It is the seemingly inappropriate nightclub singer Shug Avery [...] who provides Celie with an extended period of 'female bonding': who, with unconditional love, provides a 'holding environment' in which Celie's nascent self is reflected back to itself; and, who, as surrogate and 'good-enough mother,' and lover, helps Celie to complete the development of those capacities that enable her to deal more effectively with loss; to finalize her gender identity and choice of mature love object, and to develop a stable sense of self. (23)

Celie is able to develop a stable sense of self, or become self-actualized, because of the symbolic mothering, or nurturing, that Shug gives her. Shug is able to fulfill this role of the symbolic mother in Celie's life because she has a stable sense of self at the outset. In "Creating Generations in The Color Purple," E. Ellen Barker describes Shug as

one who is “dominated by no one. She is a woman whose experience has given her an identity [...] for all that Shug has been through, she still has the capacity to love herself, and in turn, someone else” (57). Loving herself, and in turn, someone else, is what Shug’s nurturing teaches Celie to do. Through her relationship with Shug, who truly loves Celie, Celie starts to gain confidence. Shug tells Celie, “If you was my wife [...] I’d cover you up with kisses stead of licks, and work hard for you too” (COLOR 106).

As the novel progresses and Celie becomes more self-actualized, she also becomes more attuned to her African ancestry. There are several explanations for this, including Celie’s discovery of Nettie’s letters sent from Africa that give Celie a glimpse of life in Africa. Through Nettie’s correspondence, the reader discovers the many parallels between Celie’s life and those of her African sisters. Like the women in Olinka, Celie too worked the land for many years (“Me and him out in the field all day. Us sweat, chopping and plowing. I’m roasted coffee bean color now,” Celie says referring to the work in the fields she does alongside Harpo (COLOR 27)). Walker introduces Celie’s work ethic in this passage. Celie is like a field hand for Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and derives no pleasure out of work. Work is a necessity and helps Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ pursue and solidify material gains, like housing. As Celie becomes more self-actualized, however, her attitude and actions toward labor change.

She sees Shug singing at Harpo’s and sees the pleasure Shug derives from her work. As her relationship with Shug is enhanced and Celie begins to gain confidence in herself, she ultimately leaves Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. After she escapes Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s control, she begins to sew, which, before leaving Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, she had never done for her own pleasure or economic stability. After she leaves Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Celie realizes that work she

enjoys and in which she takes pride can also be work that benefits the community and allows her to sustain herself, like Opukuya in Aidoo's Changes, whose work as a midwife brought life to the community and allowed her to sustain herself, as well. By engaging in work that benefits the community and brings about personal pleasure, Celie is not only like Opokuya, but also like Pilate, whose African-ness is manifested in part by her attitude toward labor: "Pilate is the realization of communal and nonaccumulative aspects of the rural economy. Her household is devoted to the pleasurable incorporation of work into daily life" (Willis 12-3). Through these characters, labor is personified as a means by which to sustain oneself and benefit the community and not as a way to pursue material gain, as labor is viewed in the West.

Celie's self-actualization culminates at the close of the novel when she is fully ensconced in her community of friends and family, rather than emotionally isolated as she was for so many years following her "soul murder." The notion of community is of critical importance in African culture, and Celie's life mirrors the pastoral, communal setting of Africa when she is fully self-actualized. At this point, Celie is reunited with her biological children, able to nurture them for the first time, even in her advanced age. Significantly, she is not reunited with Adam and Olivia until she has fully developed her sense of self. In staging their reunion at this point in Celie's self-development, Walker conveys that only mothers who are fully self-actualized can effectively nurture their children, an idea that echoes Aidoo's take on the interdependence of motherhood, community and self-actualization.

Walker also weaves West African notions of spirituality throughout The Color Purple. When Celie leaves Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, she says to him, "I curse you [...] until you do

right by me, everything you touch will crumble” (COLOR 204). According to Catherine A. Colton, Celie’s curse empowers her and allows her to exact revenge on Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ by asserting her self-sufficiency: “the tradition of a previously powerless woman conjuring up a curse to empower herself gain revenge on an oppressor, and bring about justice is played out” through Celie’s curse (35).

Celie’s curse is not the only Africanized notion of spirituality in The Color Purple. As Celie begins to become self-actualized, her view of God also changes to reflect a more inclusive notion of a spiritual being that encompasses everything in nature, including people’s feelings. Shug describes God as “that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all,” which Celie comes to believe as well (COLOR 191). Celie articulates her newfound spirituality in the closing chapter of the book, which opens, “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (COLOR 286). This view of God is the same that Nettie has adopted after her many years in Africa: “God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone--a roofleaf or Christ--but we don’t. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us” (COLOR 256). In this way, her view of God becomes African-centered and serves as a backdrop for her self-actualization.

Clearly, Celie could never have reached the point of self-actualization and would not be able to continue to nurture her independence without a community of supporters, including Harpo, Sophia, Squeak, Shug and even Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. In the last chapter of the novel, which is not addressed to God, Celie writes, “Me and him and Shug sitting out on the porch after dinner. Talking. Not talking [...] I talk bout Henrietta and Sofia. My

garden and the store [...] The weather cool for the last of June, and sitting on the porch with Albert and Shug feel real pleasant” (COLOR 286). In this passage, Walker, like her African counterparts, demonstrates the inextricable link between self-actualization and community and shows that The Color Purple, with its emphasis on orality and African-centered spirituality, can be effectively located in an African-centered womanist framework.

Locating Their Eyes Were Watching God, Song of Solomon, Mama Day and The Color Purple in an African-centered womanist framework confirms the consistency of African-centered womanist themes in works by established black women writers. The next step is to examine the extent to which works by emerging African-American women writers can be located in this framework. The following chapter explores two narratives by African-American women whose works are not yet widely studied in academia. By locating these works in a framework that also supports the works of Hurston, Morrison, Naylor and Walker, the goal is to demonstrate that these narratives, which can be evaluated outside of Eurocentric theoretical constructs, are part of the next wave of literature by African-American women that is worthy of scholarly consideration.

## CHAPTER 8

### LOCATING EMERGING VOICES IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE IN AN AFRICAN-CENTERED WOMANIST FRAMEWORK

In "Beyond Morrison and Walker: Looking Good and Looking Forward in Contemporary Black Women's Stories," E. Shelley Reid claims that emerging voices in the canon of African-American women's literature "build upon the work of authors like Morrison and Walker [...] [and] demonstrate an equal awareness of the pathways opened for them by earlier writers, and of the contemporary social and artistic challenges they and their characters face" (314). Two storytellers in the cadre of African-American women writers producing recent fiction are Anika Nailah, a short story writer, and Phyllis Alesia Perry, a novelist.

Anika Nailah published a short story collection in 2002 called Free. The characters in her stories are black men and women, young and old, and her collection explores cultural assumptions about African-Americans. Her privileging of the oral tradition is obvious. Less obvious but present still are the elements of the African-centered model discussed herein: the spirituality and self-actualization against the backdrop of community, as well as the tension between African heritage and what it means to be an African-American.



In her story “Four” Nailah charts twenty-four hours in the lives of four black male teenagers wrestling with coming of age in white society. The one called Gumbo feels the pull of “the madness,” Nailah’s personification of what Cornel West describes as the nihilistic threat that faces blacks in the U.S.: “many black folk now reside in a jungle ruled by cutthroat market morality devoid of any faith in deliverance or hope for freedom [...] a tragic response of a people bereft of resources in confronting the workings of U.S. capitalist society” (25). Nailah describes the ebb and flow of the madness, as Gumbo feels its pull and feels “the madness tire and leave him [...] He sensed the madness following its trail back to Clover Street” (13).

While Gumbo tries to outrun the madness, Jimmy struggles with the discomfort of being an “All-American Negro” running back in the white suburb to which he and his mother moved because she has taken a job on a nearby Army base. The third boy in Nailah’s story, Blood, collapses exhausted in bed after a fistfight with an Irish boy who has called him a “nigger” (26). As Blood begins to nod off, he “Didn’t want no dreams. Too many faces he didn’t know, didn’t want to know” (29). Finally, there is T-Bone, the tall, lanky, brilliant young man who “looked too much like his daddy” and who has the same “gift” his grandmother had, yet learns to hide it because people call it “A sign of the devil” (24). T-Bone’s gift is the ability to know and see things beyond the physical world--a phenomenon that ties him to his African roots but one that is misunderstood in a Western context.

Despite his curiosity and intelligence, T-Bone dislikes school because he has questions that his teachers cannot answer:

He couldn’t connect with the place the teachers said his people came from.

It was full of wild animals, half-naked men, and women who screamed and showed their breasts. The only other thing they'd ever done, according to the history books he was given, was line up and become slaves. T-Bone had some questions. He needed answers. (25)

T-Bone's questions about the depiction of Africa he receives in school leaves him with questions about his heritage, but Nailah allows for the embodiment of the more subtle (and less racist) depictions of T-Bone's (and the other boys') African heritage in her personification of the spiritual aspects of the boys' lives: Gumbo's madness, Blood's dreams and T-Bone's gift are real psychological experiences of the boys that hint at interactions with forces beyond their comprehension--their chi.

In the climax of "Four" the boys meet at a school dance and Blood, T-Bone and Gumbo gather outside, forming an impromptu foursome of harmonizers offering their song up to the night and the gathering crowd. They sing a song together and decide that "Something's missing... We need somethin'" (32). They need a bass, which they find in Jimmy. This passage symbolizes the importance of the community they form when the four come together--their singular voices are not enough and their sound is not complete without each of their four parts mingling together. Once they form their foursome:

They sang all night [...] The music was father to them all, as they were brother to each other [...] These four had come to the dance looking for one thing, and something else found them. Each song helped them to create an each other they couldn't make on their own. (33)

Nailah concludes the story with the boys flying up together over the earth, free:

[S]ix brown hands opened to let T-Bone, like a bird, fly free. He broke

out, high above the three. And then his heart reached back, pulled them, Gumbo, Blood and Jimmy--one bright ribbon, up, with him. They all hung on and floated there as long as they could, smoothin', soothing.' (33)

The boys achieve freedom (a form of self-actualization) through their community with each other, and in doing so embody the West African notion of womanism. As Morrison did with Milkman, Nailah symbolizes the boys' freedom through the act of flying, which can be interpreted as either metaphorical or literal, leaving the door open to the Africanized interpretation of the boys' flight as a literal ascendance, thereby placing them on a spiritual plane that cannot be understood in the Western sense. Nailah ends the story with the vernacular words, "smoothin,' soothin,'" underscoring the oral quality of the narrative (FOUR 33).

Phyllis Alesia Perry's novel Stigmata combines various devices used by Morrison, Naylor and Walker to create a narrative that is undeniably African-centered and, like "Four," can be located in the African-centered womanist framework described herein. In fact, Perry's novel uses so many of the devices used by Walker, Naylor and Morrison that she seems to be working hard to firmly establish herself among them in the canon of African-American women's literature.

In Stigmata the central character Lizzie has recently been released after spending 14 years in a mental institution for what her parents claim to be delusions; yet, for Lizzie, her delusions are psychological experiences that affirm that she has been reincarnated as her great-great grandmother Ayo, an African brought to the United States in bondage. Ayo was brought to a plantation in Alabama and eventually won her freedom. She told her story to her daughter, Joy, who wrote it down in a diary that Lizzie finds in a trunk of

her grandmother's possessions. Joy is the mother of Grace, Lizzie's grandmother. Grace also endured the psychological experiences that Lizzie endures and, as a result, leaves her family rather than burden them with her "illness." Grace's daughter, Sarah, who never understood nor forgave her mother for her "craziness" and her departure, also cannot understand Lizzie's visions.

Perry conveys orality through the conversational tone Lizzie, the narrator, uses toward her audience. Lizzie often addresses the reader directly, and her thoughts appear in writing as one can imagine she would speak: "Yeah, the hair might have been a giveaway, but the curls by Revlon are gone, as are the three-inch petal-pink fingernails and tweezed brows" (27). Perry also moves in and out of black vernacular both in Lizzie's narrative voice and in dialogue: "Eighty-six years don't look like nothing on her. Most days she looks younger than her daughter [...]" (STIGMATA 45).

In addition to orality, in the work of Perry and of Morrison, Walker and Naylor, spirituality is a key focus in the narrative. Lizzie's interaction with the spirit world overlaps her experience in the physical world to the extent that her parents think she is crazy. However, her experiences with the spirit world are so real that she has physical symptoms, including welts on her wrists and ankles produced by the chains in which her great-great grandmother was shackled. The welts on her wrist lead her parents to believe she has attempted suicide, an assumption that facilitates their committing her; however, Lizzie maintains her belief that she is sane and is experiencing an unexplainable phenomenon.

Lizzie's parents' fail to understand Lizzie's gift because they are disconnected from their African roots, inasmuch as they lack an understanding of the interaction with

spirits and ancestors is a part of daily life. It is fitting, then, that Lizzie's parents, Dr. John and Sarah DuBose embody bourgeois middle-class society and symbolize African-Americans who are far-removed from their heritage:

She wears white pumps and her peach-colored silk dress with the white collar [...]. Daddy, leaning his six-foot-four inches against the doorway to the dining room, dabs at a coffee stain on his white shirt and then considers the quilt from behind his steaming cup. (STIGMATA 22)

Sarah, who speaks "college-bred English" (22) wears the genteel, pastel clothing of a suburban housewife, and John is characterized with an air of distraction and oblivion, as he dabs his shirt, hiding behind his coffee cup from the story of his ancestors.

In an attempt to help her mother reclaim her heritage and convince her that she is, indeed, the reincarnation of Ayo, Lizzie sets about making an appliqué quilt and encouraging her mother to work on it with her. Quilting as a means for creating community among women appears prominently in The Color Purple and Walker's story "Everyday Use." According to Priscilla Leder in "Alice Walker's American Quilt: *The Color Purple* and American Literary Tradition," through quilting, "both the product and the process provide an outlet for thwarted energies, record a family's history by incorporating discarded garments, and effect reconciliations between characters" (141). In making the appliqué quilt together, Lizzie and Sarah channel their distinct frustrated energies into the quilt (each character's frustration stemming from a lack of understanding and acceptance of the other's relationship to the past), reclaim their past by stitching images that convey Ayo's life into the quilt (which Lizzie uses as a means to educate Sarah about her history) and, ultimately, reconcile themselves to the phenomenon

that Lizzie is the reincarnation of Sarah's mother (and great-great-grandmother).

The focus on matrilineal bloodlines and relationships between mothers and daughters is analogous to Mama Day and reflects the Akan value of holding motherhood sacred, as reflected in Aidoo's Changes. For Lizzie, although mainstream society has diagnosed her as suicidal and mentally ill, once she understands that she endures her painful visions because her ancestors want her to remember their pain and to educate others about it, she experiences a sense of freedom. Her knowledge of and connection to her history promote her self-actualization. In an exchange with a psychiatrist at one of institutions where she is committed, she denies having attempted suicide and asserts that the scars on her arms and back are representative of what happened to her slave ancestors:

‘Sad thing is,’ I say, picking up the shirt to slip it back on, ‘what you’re looking at was rather commonplace back then. Scars like these. That’s the thing, Doctor, I’m just a typical nineteenth-century nigger with an extraordinary gift. The gift of memory’ [...]. ‘That’s all that sets me apart, really,’ I say, heading for the door. ‘I remember.’ (STIGMATA 204).

Clearly, then, it is not Lizzie's self-actualization that is in question in the novel: it is her mother's. Lizzie is already fully self-actualized in that she feels firmly a part of her community of ancestors and has a grasp on her family's history and its connection to Africa; however, her mother has become so alienated from her heritage that she does not even know who she is beyond her identity as Dr. DuBose's wife. In going through the quilting exercise with her mother, Lizzie weaves her mother into the community of women who came before her and helps give her mother back her history, and, as her

reincarnated mother, helps to restore some of the damage that was done when her mother left her.

Toward the end of the novel, the reader learns that Lizzie met a priest while institutionalized who noticed the scars on her wrists and her back (that her parents and doctors thought were self-inflicted but that were actually signposts of her reincarnation as Ayo--Ayo inflicted the scars on her so she could feel the physical pain Ayo felt and, thus, remember her history) and told her about the concept of stigmata. Lizzie fully accepts the notion that the physical pain she feels and scarring she suffers is a version of stigmata. In this way, Perry merges the Africanized spirituality that underscores much of the text, specifically the realistic interaction with ancestors, with a Catholic phenomenon. The white priest emerges as the only character who seems to fully understand what Lizzie has gone through, an ironic twist in the narrative; nonetheless, *Stigmata's* structure and thematic content allow it to be effectively located in an African-centered womanist framework.

In "Africana Womanist Revision in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and *Bailey's Café*," Dorothy Perry Thompson asserts, "the Africana womanist widens the circle to be more inclusive of cultural elements that remember the past--Africa, creating a connectedness for diasporic women in their various secondary cultures" (91).

Thompson's assertion links literary works by African-American women to the West African idea of womanism and to an African cultural context; yet, her argument also recognizes the unique voice of engendered by black women's experience in their "secondary cultures," or their experience as American black women. The need to assimilate to a degree to the dominant culture has been a necessity for African-American

women throughout the ages to negotiate life in the New World; however, the resistance to total assimilation has been equally necessary to ensure self-actualization for black women. This resistance is captured in literature by black women in the uniquely African-centered womanist discourse they invite readers to consider in their texts.

When slaves were first sent to the New World, slave owners sought to obliterate their African-ness--their names, their language and their familial connections. But slaves resisted and went underground in the expressions of their cultural identity in ways that whites could not detect. Toni Morrison conveys this resistance through the character Sixo in Beloved:

Sixo went among the trees at night. For dancing, he said, to keep his bloodlines open, he said. Privately, alone, he did it. None of the rest of them had seen him at it, but they could imagine it, and the picture they pictured made them eager to laugh with him--in daylight, that is, when it was safe. (25)

Sixo represents the African-ness that slave owners could not fully quell and that lives on in the same way in literature by African-American women: the elements that constitute the African-centered womanist framework proposed herein could be construed as southern American, rural, archetypal or even interesting ways to re-figure classical texts by Shakespeare, as much as they could be construed as African. However, when one encounters these interpretations of work by African-American women without even so much as a nod to the ancestral influences so clear in their narratives, one might imagine Zora Neale Hurston and her literary daughters smiling to themselves, knowing that they



are fully undercover from the white master's eye, having escaped the slave owner's lashing yet again.

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