

IT TAKES A VILLAGE: TWENTIETH CENTURY BLACK WOMEN'S FICTION
AND THE SPIRITUAL APPRENTICESHIP NARRATIVE

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IT TAKES A VILLAGE: TWENTIETH CENTURY BLACK WOMEN'S FICTION
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my son and daughter, Cameron and Cydney, the source of my continued inspiration and motivation. It is also dedicated to all little brown boys and girls who believe that knowledge is finite. It is not. Wisdom is infinite, but you must have the courage and tenacity to diligently seek it.

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ABSTRACT

Through an examination of the mentor/student relationship in late twentieth century works by black women, my dissertation argues that blacks in the new world have developed a distinctive communal ethos in which individuals do not appropriately mature, heal, or become self-actualized on their own. Rather, they require a spiritual mentor or guide to aid them in this process of development. Because Western epistemology often uses binaries such as sacred and secular or spirit and flesh, I employ spirituality in keeping with West African religious philosophy to suggest that the mentor's abilities, while not exactly supernatural, cannot be entirely understood by Western logic. The texts under consideration emphasize the self as constructed by complex political, social, communal, and spiritual forces.

CHAPTER ONE: “CRITICAL INTRODUCTION”

“I could blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other. It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world. We are a very practical people, very down-to earth, even shrewd people. But within this practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things.”

Toni Morrison, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”

Through an examination of the mentor/student relationship in late twentieth century works by black women, this dissertation argues that blacks in the new world have developed a distinctive communal ethos in which individuals do not appropriately mature, heal, or become self-actualized on their own. Rather, they require a spiritual mentor or guide to aid them in this process of development. Because Western epistemology often uses binaries such as sacred and secular or spirit and flesh, I employ spirituality in keeping with West African religious philosophy to suggest that the mentor’s abilities, while not exactly supernatural, cannot be entirely understood by Western logic. Of this important characteristic of African cosmology scholar Mambo Mazama explains, “there can be no dichotomy between so-called natural and supernatural worlds. In fact, it is generally admitted that the main difference between the world of the spirits and the world of the living is one of degree of visibility, the spiritual world being largely invisible but nonetheless quite real” (221). John Mbiti expands our understanding of this distinction saying, “being closer to God, by virtue of their [the ancestors] spiritual nature, they are in a better position to petition God on our behalf, for our protection” (qtd. in Mazama 221). As a consequence, their ‘bilingualism,’ “speaking the language of the living and the language of the spirits” allows these ancestral figures to

relay messages to us (Mbiti qtd. in Mazama 221). These insights negate the more natural inclination to assume spirituality is a misnomer. Since spirituality is not religiosity, though the two are often conflated, it becomes readily apparent how most of the texts considered here qualify as spiritual apprenticeship narratives even though they do not overtly deal with religion, formal or otherwise. When juxtaposed with Judeo-Christian theology where the quintessential dichotomy is that which is not of the spirit is of the flesh, my use of spirituality connotes forces and entities that exist outside the natural realm or more appropriately, that exist somewhere between the spiritual and natural realm, as with the ancestral presences that Mbiti alludes to.

Review of Literature

Perhaps the most obvious body of scholarly work that undergirds this project are critical texts on the bildungsroman. The most well known of these texts are probably Thomas Jeffers *Apprenticeships: The Bildungsroman From Goethe to Santayana* and Randolph Shaffner's *The Apprenticeship Novel: A Study of the 'Bildungsroman' as a Regulative Type in Western Literature with a Focus on Three Classic Representatives by Goethe, Maugham, and Mann*. Unlike in earlier novels involving a hero who did not experience any significant change, the protagonists in the bildungsroman do (Jeffers 2). In fact, "its crucial theme is precisely change-physical, psychological, moral. The hero is no longer "ready-made" and, through all his shifts in fortunate or social position, stable. He is what Bahktin calls the image of man in the process of becoming" (Jeffers 2). Jeffers suggests that in Germany after Wilhelm Meister's influence on the bildungsroman declined, authors started more exclusively focusing on the self to the exclusion of almost all else including social, political, and economic concerns (3). This would not be the case

with African American authors whose protagonists may have seemingly been oblivious to the world around them but whose development was almost certainly influenced by the outward world.

The most notable book length study that examines the black bildungsroman is Geta LeSeur's *Ten is the Age of Darkness*, which explores the origins of the genre. LeSeur is careful to note that there are some elements of the black bildungsroman that are inherent to all apprenticeship narratives, not just those concerning African Americans. For instance, she emphasizes movement as being central to these texts. Often in the black bildungsroman the novelist uses movement to invoke profound spatial metaphors. For instance, the move from South to North or rural to urban often represents the shift from ignorance to enlightenment (LeSeur 76). Even if the individual is not successfully reoriented into society as would be the case in an initiation according to the anthropological concept, Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a noteworthy example revealing that the journey is essential to the genre (LeSeur 79).

As important as LeSeur's work is, however, it also does not examine the student/teacher dichotomy at length. Rather, LeSeur, and others studying the 'coming-of-age' narrative, tend to focus on the maturation process of a youth, novice, or initiate with little attention to how the mentorship relationship in these texts forms a distinctive pattern. In the first chapter of the book, LeSeur acknowledges that there has been a departure from the traditional (European) model of the bildungsroman by black writers. She contends that the "shift of focus from the English form is symptomatic of a more general shift in the use of the form among postcolonial writers, [...], to enunciate their special condition (30). While this may be true, she does not precisely identify what new

formulae they have embraced nor does she site a reason for the shift, two issues this dissertation is very much concerned with. LeSeur further asserts that “in fictive autobiographies like Wright’s and Baldwin’s books, the author’s authority to omit portions of his life, change names and places, and intensify and highlight situations pushes the work into the bildungsroman mode...Even though this is a good device to use, it creates tension in the works. Clearly in these novels, the “life” is in the service of something more than the story and the deeds done” (74). LeSeur’s discussion here of the process by which black male writers essentially go about the process of creating what amounts to creative nonfiction is illustrative; however, it is almost diametrically opposed to the process I see contemporary black women writers engaging in. In attempting to definitively articulate the defining feature of *black* literature, Toni Morrison rejects the race of the authors or even the race of the characters as being the indispensable aspect of these narratives. Instead, she claims that “there is something very special and very identifiable about it and it is my struggle to *find* that elusive, but identifiable style in the books” (342). While some might uphold that such a comment reeks of essentialism, it doesn’t make Morrison’s observations any less significant. In fact, because of this supposition, Morrison’s essay, along with Yvonne Chireau’s *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* and Karla Holloway’s *Moorings & Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women’s Literature* are probably the most significant texts for this project because they either buttress many of the claims I make regarding the narratives that are explored here or they have helped expand my thinking about black women’s lived traditions in one way or another.

Unlike LeSeur's previously referenced claims, rather than look at autobiographical writings that contain fictional elements, I am largely concerned with works that attest to the continuing import of mentoring practices in black communities, especially among black women. One such study, "The We and the Us: Mentoring African American Women," focuses on the importance of mentoring bonds for black women in academia. Although the focus of the study is specific to a very small group of women, the authors point out the necessity and efficacy of mentoring in communities more generally. Another study citing the effectiveness of mentoring among young black men found that "mentoring was viewed as crucial for enhancing an individual's skills and intellectual development; for using influence to facilitate an individual's entry and advancement; for welcoming the individual into a new occupational and social world and acquainting the individual with its values, customs, resources and role players; and for providing role modeling behavior" (Crawford and Smith 54). Such an observation holds true for black women as well as black men hence the growing popularity of organizations such as Black Girls Rock and the concomitant mentoring programs cropping up in inner city schools that such movements have spawned. From sociological studies looking at the relationships among black church going women, to literary texts emphasizing black women teaching younger women how to cook, clean, care for children, and prepare medicinal remedies, there is a preponderance of evidence which attests to the continued need for and efficacy of mentoring in black communities.

In addition to scholarly research on coming of age narratives, studies about mentoring, anthologies, and critical texts have explored the master/apprentice or mentor/protégé pairing in African American literature even if the texts have not examined

this duo at length. Some of these include *The Cambridge Companion to African American Literature*, Geta LeSeur's *Ten is the Age of Darkness*, and *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*. In *Conjuring*, Marjorie Pryse speaks of the fictive student/master relationship in one of Alice Walker's novels. Pryse writes, "The art of rootworking for Tante Rosie involves an actual spell and Walker uses as first person narrator to 'The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff' a character who calls herself an 'apprentice' to Tante Rose" (16). Yet for all her mention of this pair, no scholar has yet undertaken the task of examining this relationship at length.

Equally important for this project is an examination of those works that explore the importance of the representations of the sacred and secular in African American literature. James Coleman's *Faithful Vision: Treatments of the Sacred, Spiritual, and Supernatural in Twentieth-Century African American Fiction* takes a unique critical approach to exploring contemporary African American works of fiction. By invoking what he calls *faithful vision*, Coleman is able to take a look at the cultural and religious influences of contemporary black writers rather than participating in popular critical discourses at the time. According to Coleman, *faithful vision* is the "saving, sustaining belief that African Americans find collectively and individually in biblically based Christianity in the face of historically determined racial oppression and the hardships of an American experience directly and indirectly connected to the racial" (4). He further asserts that this concept reflects a "belief in the sacred, spiritual, and supernatural agency that saves the race and furthers the purposes of individuals who adhere to this agency" (Coleman 4). Because many novels by black writers emphasize the importance of some type of spiritual foundation in the lives of the characters even if it is an alternative

spiritual orientation like that provided by music or even if spirituality is only implicitly referenced, it is not this exhaustive amount of potential texts that is most relevant to my study. Instead, Coleman alludes to a specific subset of narratives which he believes illustrates his concept of *faithful vision* and these same narratives might also be termed *spiritual apprenticeship narratives* but based on a different set of criteria from those that Coleman establishes. He notes that while black women writers' works reflect both European and African influences, they also reveal a strong womanist sensibility in their rejection of patriarchy (Coleman 4). Equally important, he notes:

these depictions still portray traditional, less womanist faithful vision as the characters' or the black community's vision rather than the writer's or the text's and the text's own critical perspective may be conflicted and ironic. In other cases, texts imply such vision because they reveal and do not negate the sacred, spiritual, and supernatural, leaving open the possibility that faith in power beyond the mundane and the rational mind is all that there can be. Reflecting black cultural need and investment from a more controversial perspective related to African tradition, writers also, construct alternative theological, spiritual, and supernatural perspectives against oppression and hardship based on the Voodoo or hoodoo religion. These narratives engage Christian theology in relationships of syncretism and revise the Bible and Christian theology, and Voodoo/hoodoo may be a construction that opposes them. (Coleman 4-5)

Similarly, Theophus Smith's *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* takes a look at the syncretic nature of Voodoo and hoodoo, which he identifies as the distinctly North American version of Voodoo (Coleman 6). Although Smith does not look at fictional instances of African American beliefs as Coleman does, his insights reveal that the worldview of blacks in the African diaspora is markedly different from the worldview of Europeans and their descendants, a premise which the concept of the *spiritual apprenticeship narrative* ultimately relies on.

Defining Characteristics

One of distinguishing features of spiritual apprenticeship narratives is the presence of a pair, with one representing the elder or spiritual leader, and the other, the novice. Unlike Toni Morrison's ancestor, the truth that the spiritual leaders in these narratives reveals is rarely the wisdom and truth that comes from age and experience. By revealing the importance of contributions from both the protégé and elder or spiritual guide, these stories undergird the fact that the transmission of spiritual powers requires not only knowledge, but also the ability to be receptive to change, a characteristic often attributed to youth. In some of these narratives, the spiritual guide must help his or her apprentice successfully navigate a complex physical terrain while in others, the guide tries to help the apprentice traverse a state of consciousness. Christopher Okonkwo discusses the need to reconcile the metaphors used at length in his *Ogbanje, A Spirit of Dialogue*; however, his discussion is not in the service of concerns about apprenticeship and training others for a particular type of leadership. He does, however, make the following important observation about contrived binaries:

the spirit child's rootedness in complex if not an amorphous and de-centered existences supplies some of the raw materials for an author of science, speculative, and "magical realist" fiction. The intricacies of the spirit child's life arm a novelist intent on creating a difficult postcolonial and postmodern black text and on treating black racial subjectivity as irreducible. Simply put: if not Ogbanje/born-to-die, what better 'symbolically anthropological' is there for the author of a contemporary neo-slave narrative who desires a protagonist that, while in the mortal present, can travel freely, physically and spiritually, back and forth in time and space, and is part of the dead/Death, the living/Life and the unborn/Hope?. (58)

The question that he poses is an excellent one but this projects proposes that Esu Elegbara is just as appropriate as the ogbanje, if not moreso, because of his ability to be at once physical and spiritual, to travel throughout time and space, and most importantly,

to communicate with beings in the spiritual and natural world, both the living and dead. For these reasons, Esu Elegbara, as not only a prototype for questioning such frameworks, but I argue that the African mythological figure is invoked to interrogate Eurocentric frameworks of knowledge and truth. More importantly, the invocation emphasizes the importance of African ontology in the lives of African Americans and thus, Esu Elegbara, or his new world counterpart Legba, provides an apt model for many of the spiritual guides prevalent in these narratives.

The protégé constitutes the other half of the dyad found in spiritual apprenticeship narratives. This individual, much like the protagonists in a typical coming of age narrative, is depicted as uninformed, inexperienced, and in some cases, young-*Ti-Jeanne* from Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*, for instance, is 16. Much like other coming of age stories then, these narratives articulate a transition from naïveté to consciousness. The respective youth of many of the characters in these texts also reinforces the importance of the liminal phase in affecting appropriate physical, emotional, and psychological development. The factor that differentiates these texts from a traditional 'coming of age' narrative is the presence of the spiritual, religious, or ancestral figure who, most often is, the older in the pair and who provides guidance and a model that the protégé will then later emulate-often during the context of the narrative.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the mentorship relationship in these novels helps the protégé traverse a liminal phase. In some cases, this can be a physical phase as in the transition between childhood and adulthood while in others it can be psychological or temporal. Interestingly, this mentorship relationship can also be understood as a metaphor for negotiating identity. The notion of the spiritual apprentice narrative and the

dyad represented in these texts becomes extremely significant because rather than grapple with a contrived dualism of Eurocentric/Afrocentric traditions, values, ontology, etc. this pair allows African American authors to circumvent this debate altogether by positing identities that fall somewhere on a continuum represented by the two principal figures in the dyad. In *Black Atlantic Speculative Fictions* Ingrid Thaler contends that “In *Midnight Robber*, ambiguity is an appropriate term to conceptualize the in-betweenness of the novel both as a mainstream science fiction book and as a text situated in the cultures of the Black Atlantic,” (102) I suggest liminality rather than ambiguity or hybridity is the more appropriate term to describe Hopkinson’s first novel *Brown Girl in the Ring* and the other texts in this study. Thaler’s work, as does Okonkwo’s, provides an important foundation for this study, yet the figure she employs to articulate many of the concerns broached in her work is the trickster figure Anansi, whereas I employ Esu Elegbara here because he is a deity in the pantheon of Yoruba gods who sits at the crossroads. Esu (Eshu) or Legba (Legbara) reinforces the importance of religion in the lives of black people and as an important marker of postmodern black identity. More importantly, the divine nature of Legba is essential for an argument about spirituality and most importantly, the ability to be able to operate in both the realm of the natural and spiritual is essential for helping people overcome problems that are spiritual in nature. Rather than being one or the other, however, the authors in this study suggests that identity is best understood as not being either of these things, but something altogether different-something new, unfixed, undetermined. In these narratives, the liminal phase serves not just as a site where identity is negotiated but it also becomes a metaphor for knowledge transmission. The notion of the “in between” is perfect to describe the transgressive nature of black identity

because it is not static and fixed and has never been. Such a concept is different from double consciousness or hybridity because both imply an identity that is fixed-whether it be the tension of being both African and American or the tension of being many things, these concepts suggests that black identity is somehow both. These writers, however, suggests that black identity is neither hybrid nor double but rather exists somewhere on a continuum. In the process of being transplanted to the new world by way of the Atlantic, itself a liminal space, something new was created.

Inasmuch as African derived religious practices, conjuring, and other folk traditions serve as a rejection of European hegemony so too does the inversion of the master/student binary typical of European epistemology set forth in the traditional ‘coming of age’ narrative. Rather than the top down model of knowledge transmission prevalent in the bildungsroman, there is a dialectical relationship between the elder/guide and his or her apprentice in African American spiritual narratives. The guidance and leadership provided by way of this relationship not only helps the ‘apprentice’ overcome personal tragedy, but it also serves as ‘training’ in helping others overcome the subsequent crises or trauma found in these narratives. The guidance provided by the mentor is not only necessary for the growth and development of the individual, but it is also essential for the wholeness of the community as well.

Methodology

The methodology I employ to examine these contemporary narratives by black women writers combines traditional literary analyses that takes its inspiration from Karla Holloway’s exploration of the “textual power” of language in black women’s fiction and Valarie Lee’s concept of double-dutched reading. As this method deviates slightly from a

conventional literary analysis, a little context is in order. In describing her approach Lee explains, “I call my cultural mooring narrative method ‘reading double-dutch,’ a reference to jumping double-dutch, a folk activity on playgrounds across America” (2). Unlike merely jumping rope, Lee goes on to elaborate on the relative difficulty of jumping “double dutch” as she explains exactly how and why the activity work as a metaphor for her critical praxis:

There are two ropes to my analysis-the lives of the historical grannies and the writing of African American women writers. What does narrative double-dutch mean? Deliberately eschewing a “lore in literature” approach, I am less interested in proving authenticity and one-to one-correspondences between the cultural and literary “granny texts” than I am in suggesting the dual performances-the grannies as performers; the literary texts as performances, two sets of meanings interacting with each other...Rather than privileging either folklore methodology or literary methodology, I read double-dutch. (Lee 3)

Much like Holloway, Lee goes on to expand on the importance of orality in understanding both the literary and cultural performances of black women. For Lee then, reading “double dutch” allows the reader to employ the “granny midwife,” or the spiritual mentor in the case of this project, in several ways: “to place in the foreground the politics of race, gender, and class; to affirm a history of resistance; and to offer a counter discursive practice that problematizes notions of health, healing, and wholeness” (Lee 3). I do not precisely engage in a double-dutched reading of the eight primary texts examined in this dissertation because there is no fieldwork involved; however, in treating the

cultural productions of blues women and filmmakers as dynamic texts to be explored from multiple angles, the project draws its inspiration from Lee's double dutched reading in its interdisciplinarity.

Organization

In addition to briefly exploring some of the extant scholarship on narratives that share a kinship with the spiritual apprenticeship narrative, this critical introduction briefly explores the significance of mentoring relationships among black women and in novels by and about women of color. The import of such relationships and their pervasiveness in African American literature suggests the need for a model that investigates this emergent genre and thus, the introduction also explores existing novels that might fall under the auspices of the spiritual apprenticeship novel. Most importantly, the dissertation identifies the criteria texts should meet in order to be considered spiritual apprenticeship narratives. Chapter Two looks to the ancestral figure and their use of herbal lore and language in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. In Hopkinson's novel, the characters speak in a French patois, which mark both the characters' identity and their identity politics. Similarly, Nana Pezant's reliance on herbal remedies as one of the Gullah indicates a powerful connection to Africa. I argue that the ancestral figure emphasizes code switching and knowledge of the 'old ways' including rootwork as a way to resist European cultural hegemony and thus, these characters suggest that an essential aspect of wholeness is an affirmation of one's cultural history. Chapter Three argues that in Gayl Jones' *Corrigedora* and Toni Morrison's *Sula* the blues woman acts as spiritual mentor, suggesting that the blues is an important alternative spiritual orientation for people of the African Diaspora. In Tananarive Due's *The*

Between and Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*, the protagonists become trapped between two planes of existence. Rather than focus on the malicious spirit children present in these texts as other scholars have, in Chapter Four, I argue that these ghostly doppelgangers serve as spiritual guides, necessary for the protagonists to traverse the liminal phases they are trapped in.

By investigating Octavia Butler's *Parable Series* and *Wild Seed*, Chapter Five explores how gender dynamics alter the structure of the spiritual apprenticeship narrative. The most successful instances of mentoring in spiritual apprenticeship narratives are based on the dynamics of same sex interpersonal relationships. Even in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, which perfectly fits this model, a strong mentoring bond within a same sex pairing is showcased. Using this paradigm with novels where sexism and patriarchy abound makes for a more difficult analysis, but it also enriches our understanding of the genre. Certainly these books still benefit from the spiritual apprenticeship framework, as is the case with Octavia Butler's novels; however, it is readily apparent that the examination of the mentoring relationship within the texts is further complicated by the gender and power dynamics at work in these stories, thus, for the mentoring relationships in these novels to be effective, the spiritual mentor must possess both male and female character traits to successfully guide his or her protégé. Accordingly, the chapter is titled "Androgynous Advisors: Assertive Women as Spiritual Gurus" to emphasize the need for both masculinity and femininity to provide effective leadership when the protégé does not share the same biological sex as his or her mentor.

The conclusion draws out some implications of this study. Although the topic under consideration raises many questions, one option that the conclusion explores is what are the possible practical applications of this project? How might a study of these literary apprenticeship models better help us understand the role of spirituality in people's physical and psychological development? More importantly, how might such literary models serve as examples of what or what not to do, to ensure successful mentoring relationships? Ideally this study will be relevant for institutions such as churches and community organizations, which might seek to foster or create such relationships where none exist.

Ultimately, in these narratives the mentorship relationship ensures that individuals overcome physical, political, spiritual, and technological trauma or change. Accordingly, each chapter of the dissertation focuses on how this relationship helps an individual overcome these types of changes. While I acknowledge that none of these issues are mutually exclusive, the organization suggests that the topic under consideration in the chapter is the main issue that the elder or guide helps the mentee to overcome. The texts included in this project for the most part are not about formal apprenticeship arrangements-if so, they might be better understood as internships; however, just because this dissertation does not explicitly focus on the type of on the job training or internship that one might experience within the church, does not mean that such texts are outside the province of the spiritual apprenticeship narrative. Taken together, this project creates an intervention in African American literature by rejecting the theme of rugged individualism central to the bildungsroman and by revealing the limitations of such a literary model for black women writers.

CHAPTER TWO: “GRANNY’S LITTLE GIRL: THE ANCESTOR AS SPIRITUAL GUIDE”

“It seems to me interesting to evaluate Black literature on what does with the presence of an ancestor...There is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom.”

Toni Morrison, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”

The belief in individuals who could communicate with the divine, work roots, or perform “magic” may be derivative of figures from West African religion, but the conjurer has been a ubiquitous figure in the African American literary and cultural imagination as well. As expected, the symbolic value, relevance, and importance of this character varies significantly based on context. In some cases, the root doctor or conjurer has been equated with a quack doctor and charlatan who pawns moonshine off as a remedy to his/her unsuspecting victims. However, when black women writers have depicted such a character they are almost always contrasted with a matronly figure, or an ancestral figure as Morrison would say, who is endowed with the ability to heal and often possesses a true ability to communicate with the divine. African American literature abounds with these characters, and black speculative fiction is no exception. Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, Toni Morrison’s *Pilate*, and Ntozake Shange’s *Indigo* are a few prominent examples. Although the healers, herbalists, midwives, and grannies populate the entirety of the black fictional landscape, black speculative fiction lends itself to the incorporation of these cultural icons because of its ability to transcend the limitations of mimetic fiction.

When discussing literary depictions of black women healers, Valarie Lee argues, “The granny’s life is not depicted as a past historical occurrence, but as an evolving cultural icon. The [black women] writers recognize that the granny’s story is a contested terrain, a story constantly being rewritten on a number of different social registers ” (2). Gloria Naylor’s writings provide numerous and excellent examples of such women—Willa Nedeed’s supernatural strength, Miranda Day’s otherworldly gifts, and Eve, an omniscient mother figure, to name a few. In addition to being described as “a healer with ‘roots’ in the past, strength in the present, and insight into the future,” Miranda Day’s “healing powers transcend the world of science and verge on the magical” (Puhr 522). Although I would argue that spiritual is the more appropriate term to describe Mama Day’s abilities, that her abilities exceed the “natural,” suggests her (and other comparable literary “grannies”) kinship to John Roberts’ conjurer. When discussing the role of the religious figurehead in Africa or among enslaved Africans, he writes:

Under these conditions, the religious specialists, whose mystical knowledge and powers encompassed and made accessible to the community the wisdom of the ages, served as the interpreters and enforcers of the behaviors by which the community dealt with problems in the social orders. As mediators between the supernatural and human beings, their knowledge had been relied upon as a kind of insurance against the disintegration of social ties and communal processes upon which Africans depended for the survival and continuity of their community. (91)

Such persons were indispensable to their communities, yet often simultaneously estranged from their community because of their difference.

By pairing the healers or conjure women of their texts with young women, Nalo Hopkinson and Julia Dash simultaneously reassert the importance of these healers for the individual and communal health of black women while suggesting that in order to ensure

the perpetuity of communal values in the future, black women must look to the past. In keeping with the writings of Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, and a host of other black women writers, Hopkinson and Dash “depict heroic struggles and gallant role models who have helped their sisters not only endure but to prevail” (Puhr 519). By exploring both the language practices and healing arts of Nalo Hopkinson’s *Gros-Jeanne* and Julie Dash’s *Nana Peasant*, this chapter argues that through use of traditional remedies and vernacular language the spiritual mentors suggests that a reclamation of the “old” ways can mediate the cultural crises brought on by the “newness” of modernity and globalization.

Before exploring the skillful way that both Nalo Hopkinson and Julie Dash skillfully weave the figure of the conjure woman/sistah conjurer/granny midwife, or for my purposes-the spiritual mentor, it is necessary to examine the cultural milieu from which this individual arises. While certainly the context of pre-colonial America meant that early Africans came in contact with both native Americans and European Americans who would have influenced some of their practices and religious beliefs, arguably the greatest influence on black American religious beliefs including conjure has been West African religion. The manifestations of this worldview looked different in different parts of the world. For instance, some of these religious traditions from Latin America, South America, and the Caribbean include “the Vodou of Haiti, the Santeria of Cuba, the Shango of Grenada and Trinidad, the Obeah of Jamaica, and the Candoble and Umbanda of Brazil, where the survival of African religious influences survived in more indirect and sublimated forms. However, the strongest African influences were found in the Vodou traditions of New Orleans” (Lincoln and Mimaya 276).

In *African American Folk Healing* Stephanie Mitchem argues, “African American folk healing may be defined as the creatively developed range of activities and ideas that aim to balance and renew life” (11). She does, however, add the caveat that process of uncovering “its meaning is not a simple task” (11). This folk healing to which Mitchem refers might include a range of activities from “working roots” to “divining” and “cutting cards” to obeah, Voodoo, and conjure. In some instances, it is impossible to distinguish these interconnected activities, possibly because historically, especially within a plantation system, one person may have operated in all these roles; however, for the purposes of my discussion here, it is extremely important to distinguish between conjure and obeah, although the two are often conflated.

Of obeah, scholar Tracey Hucks claims that the sizeable number of Yoruba that settled in the British West Indies to work the land led to laws restricting the manner and method of these immigrants worship (21). Consequently, rather than trying to delineate these colonial laws, the British government feared everything that “threatened Christian religious sovereignty in Trinidad. All distinctions among African-derived religions in Trinidad were collapsed in the colonial literature and legislature. A wide variety of religious practices were subsumed under the term *obeah*, which was based on analogies between witchcraft, sorcery, and fortune telling” (21). Hucks goes on to point out that at least partially, “Obeah was a creation of the colonial imagination made incarnate in legal code. Nearly three decades after emancipation, legislation against the practice of Obeah became inscribed in Trinidad as a legal instrument of black social control” (21). Early in Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* we see a prime example of the way that the fear of the power of obeah is even enough to enforce behavior. When the protagonist’s

boyfriend attempts to see her, her grandmother looks at him and despite her diminutive stature compared to his towering one, when she stares at him, Tony, the boyfriend, is easily frightened. Gros-Jeanne threatens Tony by telling him, “If you don’t stop coming here, I goin’ to put mal ‘jo upon you, you know,” which frightens him to no end.

Although Tony had been raised in Canada and had medical training, “he’d learned the fear of Caribbean obeah at his mother’s knee” so after Mami’s warning, “his face went grey. He swallowed, stepped back, then turned and hastened away. After that, he hadn’t tried again. (Hopkinson 26-7) Here, Hopkinson fictionalizes a very real fear of people of African descent. After all, just as African derived spiritual practices could be used for good, they could also be used for harm. This moment in the text is also ironic given that Gros-Jeanne doesn’t actually practice obeah.

Despite their presence in the natural world, one of the defining features of conjurers was their otherworldly qualities and purported supernatural abilities. Many were thought to be able to “control the weather, to become invisible, to fly, or to shape-shift at will” (Chireau 21). Early accounts of conjurers dating back to the 1700s in Europe often describe black “practitioners of the supernatural as ‘cunning men’ or ‘witches’” (Chireau 21). However, over the next two centuries the preferred terminology would change. “ ‘Hoodos’ and ‘root workers’ became,” according to Yvonne Chireau, “the most common vernacular expressions that depicted persons who were believed to be able to manipulate unseen forces or ‘work the spirits’ (21). Much like the spiritual apprentices considered in this dissertation, rarely was there any type of formal training for conjurers. Mitchem observes that those who practice “hoodoo receive informal training, learning first from others in the family or community. The conjurer has a sense of being self-

taught, with an ability to intuit treatment...the beginner conjurer learns to collaborate with the divine order of the universe that connects that person to the community, nature, the past, and the present” (Mitchem 20). Certainly the figure of the conjurer is a controversial one with exaggerations that range from overwhelmingly positive to those that reduce this individual to little more than a charlatan. The middle ground implies that the conjurer falls somewhere in between the two with historian Eugene Genovese claiming, “conjurers on plantations [were] both conservative and subversive, unable to break the control of the plantations owner but still powerful enough to make other slaves bow to his or her will” (qtd. in Mitchem 20). Yet his or her power was less important than the community’s belief in that power. Indeed, many scholars exploring the role of the conjurer in the context of slavery and beyond acknowledge that the “threat of power, the news itself of the possibility of power, a sort of rhetorical magic” (Lee 16) often had as much affect as verifiable abilities to treat injuries, cause harm, cast spells, and so on. Because conjurers had knowledge about how to use plants and herbs, for many people the conjurer and the root worker were one and the same (Mitchem 20), and in many cases he or she was.

Like the confusing concept of obeah, hoodoo was also often misunderstood. Unlike many scholars and historians who cast hoodoo in a pejorative light, Stephanie Mitchem contends that because it was not a formal religion like Vodou, “hoodoo and conjure” were extremely important because they were tolerated since they did not reflect “an overt practice of African religion” that would have competed with the major religious denominations that were already in place (20). As was the case in places like Trinidad when people perceived obeah to be a threat to Christianity. By definition, “hoodoo or

conjure,' a set of practices and beliefs that draw on nature and its perceived energies in order to shape preferred conditions" is often taken as the "entirety of African American folk healing" obliterating the important distinctions between it and superstition or juju (Mitchem 15). Mitchem further argues, "hoodoo was pragmatic [because it] revolv[ed], around roots and herbs for healing or protection, with a constant awareness of the interconnectedness of all life" (20).

Valerie Lee takes a slightly different approach when reflecting on the "sistah conjurer." She too acknowledges that historically, "conjuring has been a pejorative label used to explain the inexplicable power of the Other, most notably the racial other who was thought to be steeped in African superstition" (Lee 12). Where she differs, however, is that she places 'conjure' within the context of Theophus Smith's biblical formations in *Conjuring Culture*, Hurston's observations in *Mules and Men*, and Houston Baker's nuanced articulation of conjure in "Conjure and the Space of Black Women's Creativity, to create the sistah conjurer. The expression 'sister conjurer' "gives them [granny midwives, ancestral figures] historical and personal agency," instead of "dismissing the women as superstitious or incompetent." Moreover, the sistah conjurer is one who, "through ancient wisdom... has the power to reassert the self and one's heritage in the face of overwhelming injustice" (Lee 16). Perhaps the most eloquent articulation of the importance of conjuring among black women comes from Houston Baker. After pointing out the "double wisdom" of two-headed doctors or conjurers, Baker dispels the myths of ignorance that often accompany Western ideas about the conjurer. According to Lee, "although Charles Chesnutt has been a common source for a discussion on literary women conjurer," [...] "Chesnutt, unlike Hurston, never puts forward a scintillating

image of the woman prophet, magician, or healer herself as a figure irradiant in the magnificence of her specific powers.” (Baker qtd. in Lee 13) Consequently, Baker expands readers’ understanding of the “poetics of African American women’s writings” in describing how these women’s works are metaphorically steeped in conjure (Lee 13).

One quintessential example of a contemporary work by a black woman that is “steeped in conjure” is Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring*, which tells the story of its 16-year-old protagonist, Ti-Jeanne, and her struggle to reconcile her Caribbean roots with the ever-present demands of the now in a Toronto that has been ravaged by violence and economic collapse. Nalo Hopkinson names the main women in the novel after the characters in Derek Walcott’s play *Ti Jean and His Brothers* when she realized that *Brown Girl in the Ring* “was a novel about three generations of women battling evil in their lives” (Hopkinson qtd. in Salvini 183). In addition to having a baby that she has yet to name, Ti-Jeanne has a drug addict boyfriend, and a grandmother that has the respect of the entire community because of her ability to conjure. To add to all this, she “could see with more than sight. Sometimes she saw how people were going to die” (Hopkinson 9). Alternatively viewed as a blessing or curse, Ti-Jeanne remembers when her mother first started hearing voices and rather than learn to serve the spirits as Gros-Jeanne tried to teach her, the voices in her head drove Mi-Jeanne, Ti-Jeanne’s mother, insane. Ti Jeanne also initially rejects her grandmother’s teachings, but ultimately, she “must learn to reconcile this spirit world with everyday reality and in so doing, reconcile her Caribbean inheritance with her Canadian present” (Baker 221). Hence, according to critic Neal Baker’s observation, the novel invokes the tension of the past and present, the old and new. The way to ameliorate this tension is to “learn from a wise woman whose life is an

example of syncretism, who moves adroitly between the world of Vodoun spirits and 21st century Canada” (Baker 221).

Ti-Jeanne faces many challenges in the novel including defeating her evil grandfather who practices *obeah*, overcoming her own fear and resistance of “serving the spirits,” and perhaps most importantly, learning to survive on her own after her grandmother is murdered. As if sensing her impending demise, Gros-Jeanne, Ti-Jeanne’s grandmother, tries to teach her grandchild many valuable lessons so that she can continue to provide a safe space for members of the community long after she is gone. Foremost among these lessons Gros-Jeanne imparts to her reluctant apprentice is the importance of herbal lore. She also suggests the power of language as a way to connect to affirm one’s identity and claim one’s roots. These lessons and the responsibility to “serve the spirits” are the only ways to achieve wholeness.

One of the first instances we see in the novel of the clash between old world values and new that Ti-Jeanne must overcome appears in Chapter One when she is tasked with taking Mr. Reed, a local librarian, some medicine for his eczema. After looking at Mr. Reed’s display of headlines, Ti-Jeanne grudgingly says it looks good but inside she thinks, “All of that was old-time story. Who cared anymore?” (Hopkinson 12), Ti-Jeanne mistakenly believes that she must focus on her temporal reality instead of contemplating the past, but Hopkinson suggests quite the contrary by foreshadowing the need for syncretism in the same scene. When Ti-Jeanne gives the librarian his ointment he passes a book along to her grandmother that he’s lending her, *Caribbean Wild Plants and Their Uses*. Ti-Jeanne’s grandmother concocted Mr. Reed’s “nasty smelling paste” using “herbs grown in their garden” (Hopkinson 12). That he would pass such a text along to

Gros-Jeanne, who obviously is tutored in the use of plants, underscores the importance of herbal lore in the narrative. Ironically, however, the eczema cream is not only made using Gros-Jeanne's knowledge of herbs, but also draws on her medical training. Ti-Jeanne, who views her grandmother's treatment as "too sometime-ish," puts some "vitamin B tablets and tube of anti-inflammatory cream" into the bag with his other packages (Hopkinson 12).

Yet another instance where Hopkinson's novel reveals the necessity of knowing the herbal treatments for various maladies also illustrates the confusion between conjure and obeah, between good and evil. When Mami is quizzing Ti-Jeanne about the various plants used to heal sickness, she merely grunts to acknowledge how pleased she is with her granddaughter's knowledge (36). Although somewhat unwillingly, Ti-Jeanne has progressed immensely under her grandmother's tutelage. However, when Tony (her wayward boyfriend) casts dispersions about the knowledge she is acquiring and the good of her grandmother's actions, Ti-Jeanne begins to have doubts:

"What's that crazy old woman doing over there in Riverdale Farm, eh, Ti-Jeanne? Obeah? Nobody believes in that duppy business any more!"

"Is not obeah, Tony! Mami is a healer, a seer woman! She does do good, not wickedness"!

But Ti-Jeanne herself wasn't so sure...Ti-Jeanne didn't place too much stock in Mami's bush doctor remedies. Sometimes herbs lost their potency...And they had to guess at dosages. For instance, willow bark made a good painkiller, but too much of it caused internal bleeding. Ti-Jeanne would have preferred commercial drugs. They could still get them, and Mami's nursing training had taught her how to dispense them...She had built up quite a stockpile of antibiotics and painkillers, so Ti-Jeanne didn't understand why Mami insisted on trying to teach her all that old-time nonsense.

Ti-Jeanne's initial defense of her grandmother suggests that she, like many others, understood and believed there to be an inherent difference between obeah and conjure, with the former typically believed to be a force for evil, and that latter a force for good; however, as Yvonne Chireau points out, conjure could sometimes be used to heal and harm, thus perhaps causing confusion. This conflation may be an outgrowth of slavery because for slaves, "as Albert Raboteau has observed, the primary categories were not good and evil but security and danger" (qtd. in Chireau 74). Because slaves often had to rely on potions and poisons for defense and as protection against violence, "healing and harming specialists did not perceive an ethical contradiction in the performance of these two activities [and] the categories of healing and harming were morally neutral attributes of the same powers of predisposition and control" (Chireau 74). Throughout the novel, we see individuals continually conflating Mami Gros-Jeanne's work with conjure to the point of offense. Gros-Jeanne almost refuses to teach Ti-Jeanne to "serve the spirits" if she continues to engage in slander against her traditional beliefs.

When a couple that lives in the Burn, the area of Toronto they reside in, tells Ti-Jeanne they have some leaves for Gros-Jeanne, the girl thinks that her grandmother will appreciate the leaves that they send in exchange for some medicine for their daughter. She reflects, "In the eleven years since the Riots, she'd had to get used to people talking out loud about her grandmother's medicines. Among Caribbean people, bush medicine used to be something private, but living in the Burn changed all the rules" (Hopkinson 14). In this regard, the ravaged Toronto may have the affect on its multicultural residents as the "New World" had on its African inhabitants. Whereas the cultural changes at the end of the seventeenth century caused "the supernatural beliefs of Anglo-Americans" to

become “less visible, shifting to marginalized sections of society, underground or out of the public sphere,” (Chireau 52) ironically among blacks, much like the residents in the Burn, the converse is true. Thus, Ti-Jeanne’s observation emphasizes the urgency of displaced people to have something to turn to as a salve for their physical and spiritual needs.

One other notable instance in the narrative that emphasizes the importance of botanical knowledge occurs when Gros-Jeanne is working in her herb garden. The plants and herbs that she becomes associated with throughout the novel quite literally provide a protected circle surround her. This image further implies the potency of herbs to not just cure physical illness, but to also be a balm against spiritual ailments as well (25). Significantly, Ti-Jeanne also believes her grandmother to be safe because she has constructed a “magic circle of stakes” in the ground that “had a deep blue Milk of Magnesia bottle jammed upside-down onto it, [for] protection against duppies, dead people’s spirits” (Hopkinson 25). This image is especially evocative because it is eerily similar to one that Julie Dash includes in *Daughters of the Dust* to show Nana Pezant attempting to ward off evil spirits, in that instance, by hanging bottles from trees.

As important as learning the value of traditional and herbal remedies, Ti-Jeanne must also learn the necessity of using language as a way to achieve self-actualization. Although we don’t see as many explicit references to the significance of embracing vernacular language as we see the significance of embracing old world and traditional remedies, Hopkinson subtly and skillfully weaves this point into her narrative. Neal Baker reveals the importance of language practices in the novels when he writes, “Hopkinson foregrounds syncretism in the way her protagonists use language when they

speak and also in the narrative structure via epigraphs” employing “what linguists call ‘code-sliding’ in both instances (221). Hopkinson herself not only alludes to the importance of language practices in the novel, but she also inadvertently reveals that this is also an area where Ti-Jeanne can learn from her grandmother. She notes, “all the Caribbean characters inhabit hybridized worlds.” One indicator of this hybridity is that:

In the Caribbean class divisions are clearly marked in language; an attuned ear can hear the points of demarcation. Caribbean people who emigrate (or who operate within more than one class level) learn to code-switch, to jump back and forth between various language usages as needed. Mami Gros-Jeanne does it when she deals with the street kids. She switches to a more Canadian English. (qtd. in Rutledge 599)

Not only can the attuned ear hear these distinctions. The astute reader also viscerally experiences the identity politics connected to language when Tony, “showing off for her [Ti-Jeanne’s] benefit, switched into the creole his parents had spoken to him when he was a child. [Because] Tony had been raised in Toronto by Caribbean parents, his speech wavered between creole and Canadian” (Hopkinson 19). Through Tony, Hopkinson reminds the reader that “for people from diasporic cultures there’s more than a double consciousness. It’s occupying multiple overlapping identities simultaneously” (qtd. in Rutledge 599).

Other scholars have attested to the importance of language practices in Hopkinson’s works. When referencing Hopkinson’s use of vernacular language in the collection *Skin Folk*, Christina Bacchilega persuasively writes, “Hopkinson’s use of Caribbean Creoles is not for ‘color’, nostalgia, or the picturesque” (208). Rather,

Hopkinson contends that “to speak in the hacked languages is not just to speak in an accent or a creole; to say the words aloud is an act of referencing history and claiming space” (“Code Sliding”). For Bacchilega, Hopkinson’s “creolization of genre, culture, and language reaches out to different kinds of readers and activates the understanding that myth and folklore are historically and discursively framed” (209). The caveat to this, according to Bacchilega would be that although Hopkinson encourages the reader to “hear creole, we know that vernacular voices have often come to represent ‘orality’ in literature, and at the same time that such representations of orality have implicitly primitivized colonized cultures and conveniently confined them to the past (209). Interestingly, in the introduction to *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction & Fantasy*, Hopkinson declares, “In my hands, massa’s tools don’t dismantle massa’s house – and in fact, I don’t want to destroy it so much as I want to undertake massive renovations – they build me a house of my own” (qtd. in Bacchilega 209). What perhaps Bacchilega says best, and what Hopkinson reveals in this quote is that her stories, especially with her use of a Afro Caribbean and French patois, “perform creolization as an outcome of history and the coming into being of a new possibility” (209).

Use of vernacular language and Mami Gros-Jeanne’s attempt to train Ti-Jeanne to “serve the spirits” is not the only place that we see the importance of neo African religious traditions in the text. Similar to Zora Neale Hurston’s observations in *Tell My Horse* about the way in which “the performative function of spiritual possession in Voodoo rituals ‘frees’ Caribbean subjects from their colonial enslavement and imperial surveillance,” (qtd. in Trefzer 305) the performance of traditions suggests a desire to resist European cultural hegemony. More importantly, “as a cornerstone of many

Caribbean faiths, spirit possession is ‘less an individual act, and more a communal event, in which the ‘possessed gives herself up to become an instrument in a social and collective drama’” (Hildebrand 54). As a transplanted Caribbean community, this same observation holds true to the community in the Burn. The communal nature of such possessions become apparent when both Ti-Jeanne and Gros-Jeanne have to ask each other what has happened after they have each been ridden by a loa.

Attitudes towards religion further illustrate models of community building through Gros-Jeanne and Rudy’s (her ex husband) respective ideas about their relationship to others around them. Rudy’s community according to scholar Laura Hildebrand, is marked by a “neoliberal conception of the primacy of the individual,” a value diametrically opposed to that of Gros-Jeanne’s community (52). Gros-Jeanne’s community instead privileges a “unique form of cooperative autonomy made possible by the current conditions of globalization” (Hildebrand 52). The multicultural community members of the Burn are drawn to Mami because of respect and perhaps love; however, Rudy, whose use of obeah, “embodies a desire for power and self-advancement” controls his community, the posse, through fear (Hildebrand 53). Rudy’s ex-wife continually resists being associated with obeah because, according to religious scholar Ivan Moorish, obeah is “concerned with the individual and his appetite as opposed to the total good and welfare of the group, tribe, or society” (qtd. in Rutledge 32). Whereas Gros-Jeanne constantly affirms the importance of “serving the spirits,” Rudy, on the other hand, “*wants the spirits to serve he.*”

In a very touching moment in the narrative, Ti-Jeanne acknowledges that she has learned much from her grandmother, even something as seemingly innocuous as

“show[ing] her how to knit those mittens [for baby]. Living with her grandmother, she could give her child a secure life” (Hopkinson 23). This is juxtaposed against whatever life she could potentially have with Tony, the buff addict boyfriend who eventually kills her grandmother. Although we see Mami Gros-Jeanne attempt to teach Ti-Jeanne many things in the novel, some that she embraces by reinterpreting her grandmother’s traditional values through the process of syncretization (Skallerup 18), Hopkinson’s comments about the novel are probably the most telling indicator of precisely how and why *Brown Girl in the Ring* serves as a spiritual apprenticeship narrative. When asked about the frequency of ritual, tradition, family, and the root-working grandmother in black women’s fiction including her own, Hopkinson provides the following insight into this practice:

It surprises the shit out of me to find that I have written so many stories with grandmothers in them!...And you’re right, there is notion in black women’s fiction that people don’t tend to operate singly. Our families are important. My work does not reinforce that whole notion of the science fiction hero who goes off by himself and saves the world. My protagonists tend to have to build community around them before they can do anything. (Watson-Aifah 168)

Such a declaration reinforces my contention that those stories that are most aptly described as spiritual apprenticeship narratives are those that not only include a pair of complimentary characters-many novels do this. Spiritual apprenticeship narratives, however, use the relationship between two characters to emphasize the importance of mentoring. By extension, these relationships reinforce the necessity of apprenticeship and mentoring models as a way to achieve communal wholeness. Most importantly, spiritual apprenticeship narratives reject the ruggedly individualistic ethos favored by many Eurocentric narratives in favor of a model that privileges a communal ethos essential for

people of African descent. In this regard, *Brown Girl in the Ring* shares many commonalities with Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*.

Because it has famously retained more vestiges of African culture than any other region in the United States, *if we consider it the United States*, the sea Islanders off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina have inspired innumerable creative and academic representations alike. LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant's recent ethnographic study *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory Among Gullah/Geechee Women* is a notable example. Although Bryant purportedly only provides a glimpse into the cultural practice of the seven collaborators in her study, through the interviews and observations with her collaborators, she reveals many of the religious and cultural practices about the Gullah as a whole, especially its women. In spite of such recent scholarly contributions, one of the most outstanding depictions of this group of dynamic black women appears on film. Julie Dash's 1991 cinematic masterpiece *Daughters of the Dust* remains one of the most poignant representations of Geechee women and their community to date.

Much like the myriad scholarly works produced about the Gullah, the amount of scholarly attention given to Dash's film and its celebration of African culture is awe-inspiring. In spite of the preponderance of scholarly material produced about the text, which is largely celebratory, little critical attention is given to the mentoring bonds within the story. Configuring her as either a priestess or ancestral figure using Toni Morrison or Karla Holloway's definition, scholars have almost unilaterally acknowledged Nana Peasant's ancestral presence in the text. Such a task is fraught with difficulty because in a film dedicated to depicting the complexity of black women's stories, all of them are important. Nana, in keeping with the spiritual apprenticeship concept or what Judylyn

Ryan identifies as an “ethos of interconnectedness,” grounds her entire family and community spiritually.

Dash’s film tells the story of the Peasant family and their transition from the Sea Islands to the mainland, a trip that is more symbolic than anything. In the course of their departure we learn about the lives and experiences of the Peasant women as they struggle to leave behind the pain of the past in favor of the opportunity that modernity and the mainland hold, or so many of them believe. Before they make the journey, the matriarch of the family, Nana Peasant, calls the family together one last time for a family gathering and picnic so that she can bid them farewell and offer them a “hand” to protect them in their new life. Symbolically, Nana’s “hand” functions as a mediating force in the narrative. In articulating the symbolic value of the hand, Judylyn Ryan suggests that Nana’s charm, “comprised of both the Bible and emblems of an ancestral presence-forms a ‘hand’ that is both a symbol of connectedness and a guide.” As such, Ryan argues that when Nana asks the family members to kiss her hand and “take me where you go, I your strength, [she] defuses the crises in the family by reminding all that their survival depends equally on the preservation of kinship ties and historical consciousness” (133).

Where the film reinforces the need to preserve “ancient African traditions, folkways, and principles,” Haagar and other family members’ rejection of Yellow Mary also reveals some of the issues that plague the Peasants and by extension, the Gullah, including “their insularity, their pettiness, and their obstinate holding on to many destructive ways” (Bobo 146). Nana’s job as conjure woman was to “connect the people to the spirit world to protect them from harm [by] drawing from the remnants of the West African traditions of the Igbo and Yoruba people” (Johnson qtd. in Stanley 151).

Moreover, according to Johnson, “she [the conjure woman] is expected to provide a diagnosis, identify the source of the problem...provide a protective ‘hand’ or charm for a client to help him control antagonistic circumstances, give advice on the management of daily affairs, and predict future events...” (qtd. in Stanley 151). Haagar denies Nana agency by preventing her from fulfilling one of her essential functions in the narrative when she refuses to kiss the “hand” Nana offers. Her crime seems especially heinous in light of her overwhelmingly desire to aid the family on their crossing to modernity. Because everyone, even the devout Christian cousin, “a reluctant Viola-accept and embrace Nana’s ‘hand,’ Haagar’s disavowal of the need for ancestral guidance is singular and cautionary” (Ryan 136). Her actions feel like a portent of things to come especially because Nana tells the viewer that the ‘hand’ connects those of this side and the other.

Somewhat ironically, in Julie Dash’s 1997 novel *Daughters of the Dust* that picks up twenty years after the film, one of Nana’s great grandchildren, the unborn child from the film, is the conjure woman of the tale; she knows which roots are helpful and which are harmful. According to her, because Nana was “ever the practical woman, Nana had little use for conjure, considering the time spent on conjure to be time stolen from life” (Dash 22). Through the entirety of the film, however, Nana is accused of possessing “old timey ways” that most would consider conjure. This identity is projected onto her in a similar fashion to the way Gros-Jeanne has the obeah label attached to her. Tellingly, Nana does not deny these charges. This is especially significant given Eli’s disappointment in her “abilities” and the accusations he levels at her because in spite of his belief growing up that Nana could “whoop the good out of evil,” she couldn’t protect him from someone “fixing” him, thus causing his wife to be raped.

Although the film's rejection of Eurocentric values is well documented, it is useful to explore some of the specific ways *Daughters of the Dust* accomplishes this. One such way is through its use of memory as a site "'of resistance' based 'within African ways of knowing'" (Langley qtd. in Petty 91). We see this throughout the film by way of Nana's continued admonitions to Eli and the rest of her descendants. Early on Nana establishes the expectation of personal responsibility essential for people of African descent telling him, "it's up to the living to keep up with the dead." Although her charge to Eli is specifically about preserving a respect for the spirits and the ancestors, such a declaration still stands in stark contrast to the ruggedly individualistic narratives of journeys and transitions that arise from other cultural traditions. In this way, Nana's statement of the need to preserve the past in the face of a journey to a land that "ain't no land of milk and honey," seems like a profound moment of resistance. Another 'resistance' in the film is through the invoking of African Gods. In symbolizing the past, scholar Sandra Grayson notes the correlation between the central characters in *Daughters of the Dust* and Yoruba deities although the film makes no overt mention of this relationship (40). If, however, we accept these pairings then the concept of spiritual mentoring becomes even more apparent. Additionally, the reclamation of Yoruba deities substantiates my contention that reclaiming Afrocentric themes is an important rejection of Eurocentric values, while simultaneously affirming the need for people of the African Diaspora to remember the past.

Jacqueline Bobo also acknowledges the significance of time in *Black Women as Cultural Readers*. While Bobo is primarily concerned with the reception and interpretation of films by and about black women by both mainstream audiences and

black women as well, in her discussion of *Daughters of the Dust* she does acknowledge the conflation of time, especially when images of the Unborn Child are invoked. She observes some of the technical details of the scenes when the past is invoked. More importantly, Bobo suggests how such scenes should be interpreted:

With the waves forming a backdrop to the scene the intent was to symbolize the Middle Passage, in which the captured Africans were brought on slave ships to the land of their captivity. The chairs carried by the children upside-down on their heads symbolize crowns and are emblematic of the grand and glorious civilization that once was Africa. As the Unborn Child states that she remembers and recalls, the significance is that the past is fused with the present moment for she is a new member of the Peasant family, summoned by one who was an active participant in that past. The suggestion is that it is necessary to cling to the parts of knowledge to be gained from those who have lived before. (Bobo 149)

Indeed, throughout the film we see images of the Earth and water, emphasizing the continuity of life and subsequently, the link to tradition and the old ways that youth, specifically, the Unborn Child, provides.

Profound insight about the importance of Nana and the Unborn Child's interactions are provided through observing other texts that easily fit into the spiritual apprenticeship framework. Although in reference to Ntozake Shange's *Sassafras, Cypress, & Indigo*, scholar Judylyn Ryan's observations about the apprenticeship relationship between Indigo and the midwife who trains her provides vital insight into the interactions of the main characters within the Peasant family as well. She writes, "In its extended focus on the woman-child Indigo, the novel demonstrates that an empowered womanhood is rooted in an empowered girlhood, and that both are sustained by the gifts and the foundation that ancestors provide" (86). Similarly, in an analysis of the relationship between Eve's spiritual mentors in the film *Eve's Bayou*, critic Tarshia

Stanley declares, “not only does she [Eve] reconcile the two sides of the conjure woman, but she ties this role to the griot as well. Eve is responsible for passing on both the letter and spirit of memory” (159). Kasi Lemmons fashions Eve in a manner similar to the Unborn Child, who, through her function as narrator, is charged with preserving the cultural memory of a family and a people. These same observations could be made, almost verbatim, about the relationship and the identities of the characters within Dash’s cinematic masterpiece as well.

An interesting possibility that has not been previously broached in this chapter, but that is reasonable given the overall bent in this dissertation to look to West African religious deities is the possibility of reading these Granny Midwives/Conjure women or their protégés as female iterations of Legba. Rather than Osun, an orisha associated with healing, maternity, and fecundity, these heroines embody Legba and as such, they guide their communities through rough spiritual and temporal terrain. The liminality associated with Legba is apt to describe these women who are not quite relegated to the natural realm as their historical antecedents were but do not solely operate in the province of the spiritual either. Significantly, these women embody strength, fortitude, and in many respects, God like qualities that are typically reserved for male protagonists. The closing theme of Dash’s film, whose central figures are an ancestral woman and an unborn child tied to the spirit world, is titled “Elegba’s Theme,” (Dash *The Makings* 16) furthering this suggestion. Moreover, Ti-Jeanne quite literally embodies Legba when, as her spiritual father, he “rides” her. Like the conjurer, a great source of these women's power is the fear and respect that arises from the communal memory of the people but more importantly, these women derive their relative power (or more appropriately their healing/medical

ability) from their proximity to the divine rather than an affinity for evil. Although the efficacy or existence of their powers is debatable because their actual ability was of less importance than their community's belief in their abilities (Roberts 101), their purported powers and their resistance to cultural domination elevates them to an almost God like status while firmly ensconcing them as spiritual guides.

These characters contested role in their community is one of the greatest contributions to their elevation to the heroic or legendary within their community. Being among the people but not quite 'of' the people adds to the awe-inspiring nature of these figures. John Roberts argues, "As individuals whose knowledge and power emanated from a source outside the slave system, conjurers were sources of power and knowledge that could neither be controlled nor usurped by the masters. As a result, "conjurers offered enslaved Africans a focus for creating oral expressive traditions to transmit a conception of behaviors alternative to those fostered by existence under European domination" 94). Likewise, that the "sistah conjurers" of this project continue to embrace communal values while denouncing what they believed to be some of the worst aspects of modernity suggests that we too must look to the past as a source of strength.

CHAPTER THREE: “HEY LADY YOUR HUSBAND IS CHEATING ON US: THE BLUES WOMAN AS SPIRITUAL MENTOR”

“But this moment of optimism, of the blues as the exercise of power and control over sexuality, was short lived...The power of the blues singer was resurrected in a different moment of black power; re-emerging in Gayl Jones’ Corregidora; and the woman blues singer remains an important part of our 20th century black cultural reconstruction. The blues singers had assertive and demanding voices; they had no respect for sexual taboos or for breaking through the boundaries of respectability and convention, and we hear the “we” when they say “I.”

Hazel Carby “It Just Be’s That Way Sometime:
The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues”

Long before Little Kim, Foxy Brown, or more recently Nicki Minaj flagrantly wielded their sexuality in both transgressive and problematic ways, female blues artists, and the audacious, sexually liberated personas they adopted in many of their songs critiqued standards of appropriate sexual behavior for women. Though these personas represent an important revision and rejection of the “black male stud” or “Jody” persona adopted by some contemporary black male blues artists in their performances, more significantly they articulate a progressive sexual and spiritual politics. Because the ‘bad woman’s exploits free her more conservative, less sexually liberated female counterparts from the constraints of conventional morality, rather than being social pariahs as they are often depicted, the blues woman is an invaluable member of her community. For those unfamiliar with the figure of the bad or blues woman, Alice Walker’s Shug Avery, from her 1982 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Color Purple* embodies the spirit of this woman. She might be best described as a character type who “is unguided by conventional norms set by the family, church or community. Almost always, [she...] is characterized by her robust sexuality, moral indifference, braggadocio persona, and/or

fierce independence” (Ervin 30-31). Steven Spielberg’s cinematic adaptation has made this description seem common place because even those who have not read Walker’s novel will recognize these qualities about Shug, who for many is the quintessential blues woman.

Although the first chapter establishes the criterion for the spiritual apprenticeship novel, I begin this chapter by examining one of the most ubiquitous figures in novels by black women: the blues woman or bad woman. This figure, though oft appearing in texts by black women, is has been used symbolically to represent the vices of the lower class or conversely, as a counterpoint to those heroines who represent conventional morality, but the reality is that the blues woman exists somewhere in the gray area in between. She is at times a figure to be envied and at others, to be pitied; however, she is always a character who one can learn from, as is the case in the texts included in my discussion here. Although Geta LeSeur in *Ten is the Age of Darkness* and Sondra O’ Neale in “Race, Sex, and Self: Aspects of Bildung in Select Novels by Black American Women Writers” intimate that African American novels of initiation are more pessimistic and less celebratory than their West Indian counterparts, the readings in this chapter suggest that this is not the case. Whereas LeSeur finds the communities in novels such as Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* and Toni Morrison’s *Sula* unnurturing (3-4), she neglects the individual mentoring relationships reflected in the novels. These types of relationships appear throughout the novels of black women but when the mentor in question is as complex and troubled as Ursa Corrigedora or Sula Peace, it is easy to overlook the inspiration that she, and other similar cultural figures (i.e. blues women) provide.

Though Angela Davis' work in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* offers crucial insights into the important contribution of female blues singers, she discusses ideology, sexuality, and domesticity in a separate chapter from preaching and spirituality as if the two were mutually exclusive. Yet so much of the testimonies offered up by female blues artists by way of the personas they adopt in their songs pertain to their attitude towards sex that their concerns about the sexual and spiritual coalesce in important ways. For this reason, this chapter proposes that the blues woman is actually a forceful spiritual presence in African American communities. Moreover, in this chapter I argue that both Jones' *Ursa* and Morrison's *Sula* serve as spiritual mentors, *Ursa* to her listening, and perhaps even, reading audience. Though Jones' novel has been critically evaluated for its treatment of slavery and black female sexuality, critics discussing *Ursa* as blues woman have overlooked the importance of *Ursa* as a heroine who inspires other women through song. Rather, they focus on the catharsis that *Ursa* achieves as a result of the blues. Likewise, while scholars have talked about *Sula* in myriad ways, in this chapter, I argue that it is in the capacity of blues woman that *Sula* fulfills the vital function of spiritual mentor, thereby providing the leadership necessary to ensure that her protégé, Nel, develops agency.

As previously mentioned, Walker's *Shug Avery* comes readily to mind when one thinks about the blues woman: she drinks, enjoys sex, and most importantly, performs the blues; however, cinematic representation aside, in African American communities, the conception of the blues woman is far from new and in fact, she has a long literary and cultural history. Often times, however, based on the context, different terms are used to describe the same figure. Known alternatively as a bad woman, blues woman, or more

recently by terms such as Queen B or Queen Bitch, this figure is one that inspires both admiration and disgust. Hazel Ervin observes that “[Much like the expression ‘bad man’], the term ‘bad woman’ connotes a sense of communal admiration for the female’s independence and humanizing courage to defy and/or to resist the patriarchy and cultural notions of womanhood” (31). Definitions and cultural models of the bad woman almost always include Bessie Smith, impress of the blues, who in the 1920s became the quintessential model of the ‘bad woman’ due to the innuendo and in some cases, sexual aggression in her lyrics (Ervin 31). The conflation of the terms blues woman and bad woman likely arises because the bad woman archetype originates with the real historic figures such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.

One of the most stirring literary representations of a blues woman comes in the Gayl Jones stirring 1975 depiction of blues singer Ursa Corrigedora. As the novel’s heroine, the blues woman from Kentucky uses her songs not only as therapy to assuage the problems that plague her personal life, but also as a way to excise the memory of slavery that she carries with her constantly. Because the women in her family have commissioned her to “make generations” and thus bear the legacy of the horrors of slavery, Ursa carries numerous psychological and emotional scars that seemingly only the cathartic release of the blues and sex provide. In these respects it is easy to see how Ursa fits into the tradition of the blues woman. Likewise, anyone even vaguely familiar with Toni Morrison’s award winning 1973 novel and its title character will recognize Sula’s kinship with Shug, Ursa, and other blues women, but though much has been made about the novel, little scholarly attention has been paid to Sula’s vital function as a ‘bad’ or blues woman. Indeed, Sula Peace has been called everything from Goddess to devil,

jezebel or whore, and everything in between. While it might be readily apparent that Morrison's *Sula* is a part of the blues woman tradition, what may be less clear is how these women serve as mentors, spiritual or otherwise. Also less obvious is the way in which the characters from popular blues and soul songs exhibit 'spiritual' qualities; these women, however, demonstrate their 'spirituality' through their progressive attitudes towards sex, defiant nature, and the candor/or humor that often accompanies the wisdom they impart. These traits are especially evident in their interactions with other women whom they frequently occasionally encourage, guide, but usually lead or inspire by example.

As a secular alternative to spirituals, the blues may seem to have little connection to religious music; however, this is not entirely accurate. James Cone identifies the blues as 'secular spirituals' and describes them by saying, "They are secular in the same sense that they confine their attention solely to the immediate and affirm the bodily expression of black soul, including its sexual manifestations. They are spirituals because they are impelled by the same search for the truth of black experience" (qtd. in Davis 7). The blues threatened organized religious institutions because it blended the sacred and secular. Indeed "its spokesmen and its ritual too frequently provided the expressive communal channels of relief that had been largely the province of religion in the past" (Levine 237). The idea of the blues as a site of emotional and spiritual catharsis is just one facet suggesting the inherent spirituality of its performers.

In addition to the connection to traditional African American religious worship, the characteristic that most suggests a spiritual quality to the blues is its connection to West African religion. In Jon Spencer's *Blues and Evil*, he suggests that the blues are

inherently spiritual in large part due to the influence of West African religion on the development of blues personas that were essentially folk heroes. Though his work revises earlier studies by white ethnomusicologists, which in some cases were inherently racist, he also corrects popular misconceptions among blacks that the blues was 'devil music.' For the purposes of my discussion here, Spencer's claims about the defiant character of the bluesman/blues woman are most useful. He likens the bluesman to the Afro American folk hero or "bad man" character because both are cast in a pejorative light by the "overculture" but then valorized within their own communities (7). Of particular importance is Spencer's definition of the overall character of the blues, which he describes as being uniquely West African in origin. He notes that "Of all the African trickster-gods, it is Legba, of the Dahomean Fon, who probably best personified the blues" (11). Spencer further argues, "it was specifically the personality of Legba, an emulative model of heroic action, that the blues person embodied, the trickster's character that the 'tragic hero' dramatized. Legba [...] is a being of synchronous duplicity, a duplicity like that in the blues. He is both malevolent and benevolent, disruptive and reconciliatory, profane and sacred, and yet the predominant attitude toward him is affection rather than fear" (11). Spencer's suggestion that white scholars writing about the blues have often fundamentally misunderstood or mischaracterized the blues because they "failed to comprehend the doubleness of African-American ontology and the elasticity of black reality, which together account for the depth and strength of black spirituality found in the blues" (13) seem especially pertinent given the literary characters that the blues permeates. Ursa and Sula, for example, embody the tensions between the lived experiences and worldview of blacks. These protagonists' material

conditions as blacks, their relative powerlessness as a result of their gender, coupled with a rebellious spirit firmly places them in this vein.

One of the most obvious ways the songs of blues women express this defiant characteristic is through their cavalier attitude towards sex. In *Blues Legacies*, Angela Davis observes that what is distinctive about the blues “in relation to other popular forms of the 1920s and 1930s is their intellectual independence and representational freedom. One of the most obvious ways in which blues lyrics deviated from that era’s established popular musical culture was their provocative and pervasive sexual [...] imagery” (3). Songs such as Bessie Smith’s “Young Woman’s Blues” celebrate promiscuity, seemingly without a thought (Davis 17). Inasmuch as these songs celebrated the antics of individual women or their persona, the songs also attest to the shifting cultural dynamic wrought by movements such as the Women’s Liberation Movement. Ideas such as the “personal is political” affirmed the importance of discussions of personal relationships that occurred in the blues because these conversations signified the importance of black women developing autonomy (Davis 54-55). If the use of provocative sexual imagery and discussions revolving around intimate relations was true for Ma Rainey or Bessie Smith, it is even more discernible in the works of contemporary blues and soul artists. Contemporary blues is rife with examples of women who exploit couples’ relationship difficulties to attain their own sexual satisfaction and in some cases to profit financially.

A final criterion for the designation of spiritual in this chapter is interiority. In *Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance in Black Women’s Writings* Donna Weir Soley expands upon Audre Lorde’s critique of the dangers of attempting to differentiate between the sexual and sacred because of the “coterminous relationship among sexuality,

spirituality, and personal and political empowerment for women” (4). Soley argues, “spirituality implies and hinges upon interiority. Spiritual people are inwardly focused, relying more upon internal acquisition of knowledge [...] than upon external directives and epistemes to guide their choices” (4). Although she goes on to say that the spiritual individual may believe in one or several divine entities, it is entirely conceivable that such an individual may not believe in any higher power at all. If one’s own conscience or personal directive is the only thing guiding their actions as Soley contends, who is to say they believe in any higher force. After all, selfishness is not predicated on identification with a divine power. Because adhering to the commands of a divine being is not a necessary criterion for spirituality, blues women are left with ‘interiority,’ which is to say, adhering to a moral imperative that is highly individual, as the major criterion they must exhibit to be considered spiritual.

Because both Jones’ and Morrison’s novel were published during the 70’s, a time when the social and political relevance of feminism was increasingly felt, their heroines did more than just provide an acceptable representation of womanhood. Though a feminist reading of *Ursa* and *Sula* is fraught with problems, their independence and audacity offer an idealized version of feminist womanhood and also connects them to their musical contemporaries of the same time period. A cursory examination of the lyrics to contemporary blues and soul songs popular during the 1970’s and the 1980’s reveals an amazing audacity and brashness on the part of the speaking persona. More importantly, the exploits of the blues woman character suggest that she is extremely introspective and thus, ascribes to a moral code that most may not understand. Yet the blues woman, whose musical iteration is frequently the ‘other woman,’ is steadfastly

committed to helping out (i.e. mentoring) her fellow sisters, even the ones whose husbands she has slept with. R&B and Soul singer Denise LaSalle's narrator in her 1984 hit, "Your Husband is Cheating on Us" provides one such example. She exclaims,

The lies he used to tell you
I know them all too well
But now he's lying to me girl
And that's why I'm gonna tell

[...]He's got too many women
Now somebody's got to go
But before I bow out gracefully
I'll tell everything I know.

[...] He's lying to me, he's lying to you
It won't be too long before he's lying to her too
Hey lady, your husband is cheatin on us
I know you thought you had a good man
Thought you had a man that you could trust

Similarly, in the Soul Children 1973 "I'll Be the Other Woman" the singer laments,

The neighbors are whispering
Saying that you don't care
If you cheat on your wife for me
You'll cheat on me for someone else
I'll be your part time love
But that's as far as I'll go
To be your part time fool
Would be stooping a little too low
Loving a married man
This I really don't mind
But a married Casanova
Is a little out of my line
I'll be the other woman
Just as long as I know
I'm the only other woman
You make love to

In both songs, the other woman has no compulsion about sleeping with someone's husband; however, she balks at the idea of sleeping with a whorish man-that is to say, one who is sleeping with numerous women.

While it is conceivable that this hesitation at sharing a man who is not hers to begin with arises from jealousy, more likely she resists the idea of being one of many 'other women' for financial reasons. In "Badd-Nasty: Tricking the Tropes of the Bad Man/Nigga and Queen B(?)," L.H. Stallings provides a plausible explanation for why this might be. She observes, "Despite the empowering uses of the erotic and female sexuality as discussed by [Audre] Lorde [...], Black women understand that self-love and philosophical gains don't pay the bills." She further expands:

With the politicization of sexual identity, sexual desire also becomes work. Queen B(?) figures exemplify that if Black women remember the shifting between sex as work and sex as play, they can create sustaining representations of the self that won't limit metaphysical and material possibilities. Queen B(?)'s use of the work/play tactic blurs the line between the two endeavors and dismantles the division between public and private discourse, an act that benefits many representation of Black female sexuality. (171)

Though Stallings is speaking of a more recent phenomenon, the Queen B as an evolution of the bad/blues woman makes Stallings observations about the ideological underpinnings of the Queen B's sex as work/play philosophy just as relevant to the blues women in these songs. These characters suggests that while it is one thing to have to share a man and his money with his wife, it is an entirely different matter to be expected to sit idly by while a man takes on numerous lovers who would eventually replace them and supplant their potential profit, as the latter song implies. Such a reading of these

figures reveals both a progressive attitude towards sex and more importantly, a shrewd head when it comes to business or financial matters.

It is just as probable that the character has ethical reasons for exposing the affair rather than merely financial motives known only to her. That these songs present a woman who is faced with a complex moral dilemma and ultimately decides to take the calculated risk of exposing her affair with a married man, reinforce this idea. Why might a woman risk being ostracized, harassed, and perhaps even physical harmed, to expose an affair? The lines “The lies he used to tell/I know them all too well/But now he’s lying to me/And that’s why I’m gonna tell” imply that an essential part of the blues woman’s mission is to expose her married sister to her husband infidelities or inadequacies, which effectively free those women to seek retribution. This might mean that they divorce or leave their husbands, but more likely getting even might simply involve the wife seeking a paramour of her own. Although none of these scenarios might come to fruition, the *telling* and exposing of truths is a significant act because it at least heightens the wife’s awareness such that she can make an informed decision about how to respond to her husband’s indiscretions. Whereas merely having the affair might indicate immorality and unconscionable behavior, having the affair and talking about it suggests a more neutral position and rather than being vindictive, as many would argue, I view the blues woman’s actions as redemptive. After all, she has already fornicated, committed adultery, coveted another woman’s husband, and perhaps many other ‘sins,’ but however we attempt to quantify or categorize her actions, she seems to not want to compound these sins, to not add insult to injury, by continuing to allow another woman to be duped by a ‘no good man.’ She levels the playing field in that the wife now has the same opportunity to seek

sexual freedom and satisfaction that the husband sought and in this way she has become the ultimate teacher. The message perhaps-don't get mad, get even.

Although Betty Wright's "The Cleanup Woman" is told from the perspective of the spouse rather than the lover, it too implies that the lover is a more pensive character than most popular depictions might suggest. Wright's narrator exclaims,

A clean up woman
Is a woman who
Gets all the love we girls leave behind
The reason I know
So much about her
Is because she picked up a man of mine
[...]
I took this man's love and put it on a shelf
And like a fool, I thought I had him all to myself
When he needed love, I was out havin' fun
But I found out all I had done
Was made it easy
For the clean up woman
To get my man's love, uh-huh
Yeah, that's what I did
I made it easy
For the clean up woman
To steal my baby's love, oh, yeah

The song serves as a cautionary tale extolling the virtues of being a 'good' woman. The lines "I took this man's love and put it on a shelf/And like a fool, I thought I had him all to myself/When he needed love, I was out havin' fun" reinforces stereotypical gender roles in proposing that one of the best things a woman can do to maintain a happy home life is be both emotionally and sexually available to her man (i.e. stay at home).

Significantly, the narrator juxtaposes providing him with love and pursuing her own personal interest because *clearly* the two are mutually exclusive. Rather than being a dramatic role reversal from LaSalle's narrative in 'Your Husband is Cheating on Us,' the blues woman here also acts as a mentor, but the message has been reversed. Where

LaSalle's song exposes the husband's imperfections, Wright's exposes the wife's. Both women, however, seem to be driven by their own moral imperatives, which imply that it is their duty to expose the underlying root of the marital problems if for no other reason than to educate her less worldly sisters about the evils of men and marriage, an act that might be described as altruistic.

Also, of importance is the exchange between lover and spouse because there is a dialectical exchange of knowledge, often central to the spiritual apprenticeship model. Just as the spouse has learned as a result of her experiences with the other woman, she inadvertently becomes a mentor to other spouses who could potentially fall victim to their husband's indiscretions. By calling attention the existence and actions of 'the cleanup woman,' the wife too has attempted to enlighten, educate, and otherwise mentor women in similar circumstances. In this same way, both *Corrigedora* and *Sula* present the complex relationship between women, especially when men are involved.

In "Emerging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendships in Contemporary Fiction by Women" Elizabeth Abel articulates the importance of critically examining female friendship by arguing that "Feminist theory must take into account the forces maintaining the survival of women as well as those that maintain the subordination of women. A theory of female friendship is meant to give form, expression, and reality to the ways in which women have been for our selves and each other" (qtd. in Sy 2). Abel's ideas about female friendship are applicable here because the mentoring relationships in these blues songs and in Morrison's novel occur within the context of a close interpersonal connection, a relationship most readily described as friendship. Significantly, the lack of close lasting female relationships allows Ursa to channel her

emotions into her music, which in turn, provides guidance and inspiration for other women. Indeed, the following illustrative examples attest to the ways black women have been for themselves and for others, especially other black women, by depicting women who above all, have tried to encourage, embolden, or strengthen their sisters. Rather than providing a tangible model of leadership, which an expression like internship might imply, the characters considered here inspire by way of their philosophical beliefs and life experiences. Their close personal relationships with other characters, or lack of, illustrate the necessity of a mentoring bond. These blues women provide leadership by drawing from a strong spiritual base, namely the blues ethos that characterizes their life.

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Morrison's *Sula* readily fits into the spiritual apprenticeship model, in part because of the mysticism surrounding her. Christopher Okonkwo and other scholars who rightly identify *Sula*'s African lineage and mythic origins buttress the notion of *Sula* as spiritual mentor. Though they do not talk about her as a mentor, they do acknowledge that *Sula* does not quite exist in the realm of the natural, furthering the perception of her as a otherworldly. More relevant to my discussion of *Sula* perhaps, is Jeanne Smith's argument about *Sula* as trickster and iconoclast. In *Writing Tricksters* she observes:

In virtually all cultures, tricksters are both folk heroes and wanderers on the edges of the community, at once marginal and central to the culture. Tricksters challenge the status quo and disrupt perceived boundaries. Whether foolishly, arrogantly, or bravely, tricksters face the monstrous, transforming the chaotic to create new worlds and new cultures. In doing so, they offer appealing strategies to women writers of color who, historically subjugated because of both their race and their sex, often combine a feminist concern for challenging patriarchy with a cultural interest in breaking racial stereotypes and exploring a mixed cultural heritage...In their novels, tricksters serve to combat racial and sexual oppression and to affirm and create personal and cultural identity.

Tricksters are not only characters, they are also rhetorical agents. They infuse narrative structure with energy, humor, and polyvalence, producing a politically radical subtext in the narrative form itself. (2)

Such an observation about literary enactments of this figure hold true for the historical and cultural figure as well. Imagining Sula in this way is in keeping with Jon Spencer's articulation of the bluesman (or woman) as an inherently spiritual because of their affinity for and likeness to Legba, the West African deity often employed as a trickster in Diasporic contexts. Moreover, Smith's insights about the presence of trickster figures in novels encourage diverse interpretations of Sula's identity. The mischievous spirit of the ogbanje and the liminality of the trickster are apt for identifying Sula as mentor in the tradition of the blues woman, specifically because of her lackadaisical attitude towards sex. It is in this capacity as defiant blues woman/bad woman that Sula as mentor teaches her friend Nel one of the most important lessons in the novel- female friendships should always be prioritized above intimate relationships.

Though critics and scholars may disagree about exactly who or what Sula is, Morrison's novel clearly pronounces that one of the most important things a poor black woman can have is a friend and it is Sula and Nel's friendship which forms the central mentoring bond in the text. Morrison herself notes that "People talk about the friendship of women, and them having respect for each other, like it's something new. But Black women have always had that, they always been emotional life supports for each other" (Giddings 16). It is this emotional connection between Nel Wright and Sula Peace, which provides the central relationship in the story. Because the novel starts when both characters are young girls and chronicles their development there is a strong temptation to talk about the novel amidst the tradition of the black bildungsroman; yet, such a model

does not account for the close personal relationship between a dyad that is not a mother/daughter pairing in Morrison's novel or others like it. In *Ten is the Age of Darkness* Geta LeSeur focuses most of her critical discussion on Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, she does identify some elements of *Sula*, which would place it within the tradition of the black bildungsroman as she is defining it. First, *Sula*, like other characters per this model, is older than the traditional protagonist in the Western form of the novel. LeSeur also argues that communal relationships are central to the coming of age experiences by black novelists (2-3). While I agree with LeSeur's observations, *Sula*'s development is of less concern here than Nel's, in part, because over the course of the novel *Sula* seems to change very little. That a character experience grow and mature in the course of a narrative is a prerequisite for all coming of age stories-that this development is predicated upon guidance from a spiritual guide is specific to my articulation of the spiritual mentorship narrative. My intention in this final section is to explore the ways in which *Sula* establishes herself as a spiritual mentor.

It seems hard to imagine *Sula* as anyone's mentor, let alone a spiritual one, given that many critical assessments of *Sula* script her as selfish, which in many respects she is. As a youth, she spends her time pursuing her own pleasure and lost in her own thoughts (118). As an adult, this trend continues because since "there was only her own mood and whim" she let it reign free (Morrison 121). *Sula*'s indifference to sex, though often astonishing, and her observations about her relationship to the community, are illuminating because they reveal that she is not wholly unconcerned with others. She observes, "She was pariah... and knew it. Knew that they despised her and believed that they framed their hatred as disgust for the easy way she lay with men. Which was true.

She went to bed with men as frequently as she could. [Because] It was the only place where she could find what she was looking for: misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow” (Morrison 122). Much like her kindred spirit the blues woman, Sula’s reflections reveal her to be ‘inwardly focused,’ but more importantly, her desire to feel sorrow and misery insinuate that she wants to be empathetic in spite of her inability to do so.

Beyond being just selfish and universally evil as she is oft characterized in the novel, Sula is a woman of great depth, understanding, wisdom and even goodness. Though the community of the Bottom characterizes her as the Devil’s offspring (Morrison 118), their belief in her wickedness draws them closer together. That “they began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes, and in general band together” should be sufficient indicator of Sula’s goodness (Morrison 117).

Sula’s most obvious character trait connecting her to the blues woman is probably her defiant, outspoken nature. Rather than being quiet and acquiescent, from the moment she returns to the Bottom, Sula starts to figuratively “raise hell.” When Eva accuses Sula of “starting something” by brushing off any mention of the monetary sacrifice Eva has made by sending her money over the years, Sula responds that it “takes two” (Morrison 92). From there all pretense of civility erodes as Sula refuses to even entertain her grandmother’s suggestion that she get married and have children. When Eva says, “You need to have some babies. It’ll settle you,” Sula responds “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (Morrison 92). Although Eva’s admonition is not intended in the same vein as the Corrigedora women, Sula’s response here reminds readers of the importance of childbearing in Gayl Jones’ novel as well; however, rather

than “making generations” that would bear witness to the legacy of slavery, for Sula, having children would make her a slave to someone else’s life and their story rather than being able to actively create her own. Indeed, Sula’s desire to remain independent from anyone or anything seems inextricably bound to her defiant nature.

Although I am suggesting that Sula’s outspokenness is ultimately a positive attribute, it is not without its problems as well. For instance, Sula tells Eva that she needs her to “shut [her] mouth,” she goes beyond being just impertinent (92). Even in fictive African American communities such as the Bottom, the egregious sin of talking back to an elder is virtually unprecedented; one of the many reasons Sula is considered an abomination of sorts. But Eva and Sula’s exchange following that incident is indicative of the many reasons that Sula is considered evil. In addition to being fiercely independent and defiant to authority figures, Sula is also blasphemous. When Eva tells Sula that “God’s going to strike you!,” Sula replies, “Which God? The one watched you burn Plum?” Eva goes on to accuse Sula of being crazy for watching her mother burn and says that Sula “should have been burnt.” Sula responds in turn by saying that if there were going to be any more fires in the house, she would be lighting them (Morrison 93). Such comments exceed the normal audacity of the blues woman and border on disrespect. Given the tone of these and many of Sula’s other remarks in the novel, it is understandable why many readers shirk at the idea of Sula as a positive role model for other women.

Sula’s cynicism is markedly different from those around her but it firmly places her in the company of her shrewd and world-weary blues sisters. As such, Sula’s skepticism about life may help temper Nel’s optimism by helping prepare Nel for some

of the harsh realities of life. Nel remembers Sula's observation that "The real hell of Hell is that it is forever" even when she is still filled with hate towards her former friend (Morrison 107-108). Such a proclamation further illustrates Sula's transitory nature in that she equates monotony with hell. By proffering this statement to Nel, Sula seems to be advising Nel to embrace change and difference because doing the same thing over and over is a torture in itself. Embracing or at least being receptive to change frees one from a living hell per Sula's philosophy.

Because of the amount of time Sula's spends cultivating self-love, it is probably the thing that she is best equipped to teach Nel, an unwilling protégé. In one of the final scenes of the novel, Sula uses her unique, but harsh brand of wisdom, to impart the virtues of independence to Nel. Sula creates a powerful metaphor by comparing the life of other women in their community to her death but in response to Sula's proclamation that "[she] sure did live in this world," Nel retorts, "Really? What have you got to show for it?" Sula's reply and their subsequent exchange is significant because Sula essentially says to Nel over and over-live life on your own terms and not anyone else's, though she articulates this idea in different ways:

"Show? To Who? Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Which is to say, I got me."

"Lonely, ain't it?"

"Yes, But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody's else's. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain't that something? A secondhand lonely." (Morrison 143)

That Sula continues to exalt the value of nonconformity indicates that she wants to elevate Nel from the status of lost cause that she had previously relegated her to. She had all but given Nel over to the town and "all of its ways" (120) but on her deathbed she

nearly pleads with Nel to see the value in really *living*. Is it disturbing that Sula privileges her way of life including freedom and lack of personal responsibility over Nel's commitment to being a mother and at one point, wife? Certainly, but Sula firmly believes herself to be in the right and by continually telling Nel the value of making her own decisions, she seems to want Nel to do the same thing. For someone as self absorbed as Sula, it never occurs to her that perhaps commitment to her family and friends makes her happy. Instances such as this and her almost childlike query to Nel that maybe she was the good one support the notion that Sula, wants to do the right thing, even if she never quite accomplishes it before her death. Coupled with her deathbed channeling of blues woman Bessie Smith, these instances firmly ensconce Sula within the tradition of blues woman as spiritual mentor.

The final pages of the novel are significant because of both Nel and Sula's epiphany about the coterminous nature of their relationship. Though Sula attempts to teach Nel the value of autonomy, by the novel's end, Nel has learned much more. They have learned about the value of friendship. After Sula sleeps with Nel's husband and Nel completely severs their relationship, Sula takes on lovers to attempt to fill the void in her life caused by Nel's absence but she soon realizes that their temporary pleasure is inadequate when compared to the long-term satisfaction of friendship. Sula remarks, "They taught her nothing but love tricks, shared nothing but worry, and gave nothing but money. She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that lover was not a comrade and could never be-for a woman" (Morrison 121). This lesson is not lost on Nel either. After Sula's mother tells Nel that there was never a difference between them, she begins to rethink their friendship and the schism that came

between them. Though Eva is half delirious and literally begins to confuse the two girls, to Nel, she possesses the prescience of a sage. Initially after Eva's confrontation Nel even acknowledges her self-righteousness towards Sula's response to Chicken Little's death in spite of the similarity of their reactions. She reflects that what she thought was "maturity, serenity, and compassion was only the tranquility that follows a joyful stimulation. Just as the water closed peacefully over the turbulence of Chicken Little's body, so had contentment washed over her enjoyment" (Morrison 170). However, much like Sula, after she has some time to consider Eva's remarks, she reacts with hostility to the accusations because the old woman appears to recognize some indisputable truth: in some fundamental way Nel and Sula are the same. Not only does their similar reaction to Chicken Little's death further this idea but their almost identical response to Eva as well. After thinking about what she has said, Nel comes to the conclusion that Eva is both "spiteful" and "mean" (Morrison 171).

Given the recognition of she and Sula's similarities brought on by the conversation with Eva, it is no surprise that at the novel's close, Nel makes the most important epiphany in the novel-nothing can fill the void of losing a friend. While walking away from the funeral, Nel imagines Sula's spirit with her she says, "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude. [As] the loss pressed down on her chest and came into her throat," (Morrison 174). Nel, like Sula, finally realizes that one of the most important things a black woman can have is a friend. Her final exclamation that "[they] was girls together" followed by her heartfelt "O Lord, Sula" and "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl" implies that Nel is finally, after all of Sula's lessons, developing her voice. At this point her voice is a lament for her lost friend but the "girl, girl, girl utterance

indicates the familiarity and kinship of old friends about to embark in a heart to heart chat. In this light, Sula's death becomes even more redemptive because it allows Nel to begin to articulate that thing that she could not while Sula was still alive. Without the burden of anger and resentment holding her back, the novel's close implies that there is now a freedom to Nel's actions and life that there hasn't been before now. As Nel's other half, Sula said and did the things that Nel would not. It is not that Nel could not have done the same things while Sula lived but she did not have to. As the other half of herself who instinctively knew what Nel was thinking, Sula's actions were confining. After Sula's death, however, Nel has to do the speaking on her own, hence the "girl, girl, girl" lamentation at the novel's close.

Much like Morrison's *Sula*, Ursa Corregidora elicits conflicting reactions from the community in Gayl Jones' 1975 novel. Men are immediately attracted and enamored with Ursa because of her looks and women who do not know Ursa are often skeptical about her. Upon returning to the community she grew up in one woman remarks to Ursa's mother, "Who's that? Some new bitch from out of town going be trying to take everybody's husband away from them?" (Jones 73) Even after being informed of who she is the women in town still distrust Ursa and insult her for any perceived slight, particularly involving their husbands or boyfriends. In spite of problems with women, there are important female relationships present in the novel, though at times the female relationships are as fraught with problems as the male/female relationships, if not moreso.

Early in the novel the reader is introduced to Cat, whose friendship with Ursa is as unsettling as it is important. In spite of the tension and occasional problems between the two women, much like Nel and Sula, Cat and Ursa aid each other in their subsequent

development. Although Ursa is quite obviously the blues woman of the text because she is literally a blues singer, her friend Cat ironically embodies the wise, world-weary spirit of the blues woman more than Ursa herself. This is not surprising given that in an interview with Charles Roswell, Gayl Jones has said that although it is important that Ursa is a blues woman part of her significance is Ursa doesn't just provide a personal testimony. Rather, through Ursa "Praise [is] directed away from the 'I' character to perhaps other characters or another character in the stories who act(s) more as a moral center" (qtd. in Clabough 170). Cat can be read as one such character who occasionally seems as much the moral center as Ursa. Before revealing her own romantic interests in Ursa, Cat proves to be a trustworthy and dependable friend. She brings Ursa food, cooks for her, and allows her to stay with her temporarily. Most importantly, she offers her what appears to be friendly, impartial advice about her love life.

Cat's penchant for offering her advice and opinion, no matter how unpleasant, is revealed early in the novel. In one of the first scenes revealing their friendship, Cat cautions Ursa about taking and not being able to give in return. Specifically, Cat warns her of the dangers of trying to use the affection of one man, Tadpole, to replace the malice she suffered at the hands of another, her ex-husband Mutt (Jones 26). Though it later becomes evident that part of Cat's desire to discourage Ursa from entering another relationship arises from her own self-interest, Cat's advice is still instrumental in helping shape Ursa. Rather than being able to offer advice to other women by way of direct relationships such as friendship, she channels her learned wisdom, pain, and experiences into her music.

The central figure in the novel, Ursa, resists characterization in that she is the quintessential blues woman in some respects. In others, she hardly resembles this figure at all. Jones does not depict Ursa as rebellious—in fact, in many scenarios she seems almost passive. She's not bawdy, raunchy, or lascivious. Her fear and near revulsion of sex suggests that she borders on frigidity. In spite of this, she channels both spirituality and interiority through her music. Like other blues women, she uses the blues to help her explain what she cannot (Jones 56). More importantly, the blues serves as a cleansing for Ursa. Sirene Harb argues that because the Corregidora women have been fractured by the memory of slavery “they do not realize that they are perpetuating the logic, spirit, and politics of oppression by passing traumatic legacies and haunting tales to their offspring” (116). By using her music as a corrective to attempt to heal the brutal scars of slavery, Ursa is engaged in a selfless act because she tries to create new a new identity for herself and others independent of the burden of slavery rather than continue the cycle. In this way, the blues acts as an ideal alternative spiritual orientation to mainstream religions such as Christianity rather than being “devil blues” (Jones 50). Indeed, one of Ursa's few acts of assertion is her commitment to singing the blues to attest to the atrocities that the Corregidora women have experienced in spite of her mother's insistence that “songs are devils. It's your own destruction you're singing. The voice is a devil...Unless your voice is raised up to the glory of God” (Jones 53). Ursa's persistence in singing the blues further suggests the potential for the blues to act as a liberatory discourse because it aids Ursa in the development of her own critical voice while simultaneously allowing her to engage in a type of ancestor worship through song and thus allow her to bear witness to other women.

The blues' ability to provide a testimony in many ways may be the most compelling argument for Ursa as spiritual mentor. As a musical form whose features include testifying and call and response among others (Boone 84), it is easy why critics such as James Cone and Lawrence Levine have called them the secular equivalent of spirituals. Critic Alphonso Hawkins also reads Ursa as spiritual in this regard by emphasizing the "existential" nature of the two Corregidora women's exchange. He argues that Ursa as singer "becomes the historian (her mother) as she (mother) passes down the egregious encounters of her forbears on a Brazilian plantation. The sacred becomes the secular and vice versa" (659). As one who preserves the legacy of the Corregidora women, Ursa then gives evidence to her listening audience but not just about the horrors of slavery and the atrocities that the women in her family experienced.

Most of the lessons Ursa offers through her music and which imbue her life are about life and love. When dreaming about a conversation with her ex husband Mutt she explained that the blues was more than just music; instead it was a way of life. Ursa explains that "the blues is something you can't loose" (Jones 97). James Cone describes this phenomenon by saying the blues "are an artistic response to the chaos of life. And to sing the blues truthfully, it is necessary to experience the historical realities that created them" (qtd. in Hawkins 658). Put another way, one cannot sing the blues if one has not *had* the blues. Though this is often thought to refer to the socio-economic status of the singer, Ursa's blues seem to revolve around issues of gender. Songs about the bird woman who can take a man on a trip at her discretion but not return him mystify the audience but also offer an empowering vision for female listeners (Jones 147). Women can be strong, assertive, and most importantly, free; however, they must first exercise

their right to choose. Like Sula and other blues women, Ursa advocates, at least through her music, agency, which is essential if one is to follow one's own moral imperative.

In addition to these characteristics that establish the blues woman as being inherently spiritual, she is also an integral and essential member of African American communities because she is a constant reminder of the importance of freedom. Though spirituals largely articulated the worldview of blacks during slavery, there was a definite shift after emancipation. Because many of their aspirations and hopes were never actualized, "blues created a discourse that represented freedom in more immediate and accessible terms" (Baker qtd. in Davis 7) Although other groups used music as an outlet for their anxieties or to express their idealism about sex and love, post slavery blues was especially liberatory because sexual freedom represented freedom of choice and other social freedoms as well. Moreover, because the material condition for blacks was relatively unaffected, one of the major changes that occurred post slavery was the right to sexual choice. It was "striking the way the blues registered sexuality as a tangible expression of freedom" (Davis 8). As much as readers or listeners might question the sexual politics and choices of Sula and her comrades, it is almost impossible to deny the importance that they have the right to choose. Given that during slavery the bonds of passion and love were tenuous, articulating ownership of their own body and their own right to choose their lover(s) is yet another contribution that this figure makes to the community.

Sula, Ursa, and the other blues women considered here remind readers that for black women, the practice of helping each other has been instrumental to their success and the survival of their communities. In particular, these women emphasize the

importance of verbal acuity in black communities through their quick wit and sly tongue, which becomes most apparent when they are giving advice to other women. Beyond emphasizing the important contributions of one woman, these narratives also emphasize the importance of community and the ways in which women's lived experiences and their creative impulses coalesce. One *Corregidora* critic argues that the blues transforms the individual into the collective and "it transfigures affliction into a transitional spirit, uncompromised, non-negotiable, and cathartic" (Hawkins 664). Indeed, both *Sula* and *Corregidora* articulate the experiences of the community by way of the individual.

In "Bildung in Ethnic Women Writers," Bonnie Braendlin argues that the "objectivity of the Bildungsroman offers female authors distancing devices, such as irony and retrospective point of view, which convey the complexity of the female quest for selfhood and confirm its universality" (77). While I would agree that the search for autonomy is universal, Braendlin's assessment of the formal contributions of the bildungsroman and its purported "objectivity" reveals its limitations for black women writers. A genre as celebratory of the individual, with little assessment of how that individual is shaped by others, is ill equipped to account for the importance of the community in shaping one's identity. Moreover, a genre so invested in reinforcing patriarchal social structures does not speak to the centrality of black women in shaping the lives of other black women. It is true that black women writers, among others, have challenged Eurocentric and male dominated prescriptions of what constitutes appropriate values for a more encompassing vision that elevates personal choice and communal values (Braendlin 86). Yet such a tendency does not seem to be a deliberate appropriation of the bildungsroman as much as it seems to be a rejection of the major values that

underpin it. Most notably, the coming of age narrative reinforces the primacy of the individual to the exclusion of all else.

In keeping with Womanist ideas, rather than celebrate the part, Morrison's *Sula* and Jones' *Corrigedora* celebrate the whole, by revealing that an individual often must be aided in their journey towards personhood. Indeed, the texts included in this chapter reaffirm that "Black women writers [and musicians] collectively depict the Black woman's internal struggle to unravel the immense complexities of racial identity, gender definition, and the awakening of their sexual being [... that] produce[s...] a literature not confined to the 'usual' Bildung model (LeSeur 101). What I hope my foregoing examination has revealed, however, is that rather than ruminating on whether these texts actually deviate from the usual *Bildung* model, which is certainly true, a more useful endeavor is to look at what these texts are doing, which is illuminating the importance of mentoring relationships among black women.

Although Bonnie Braendlin only includes Alice Walker in her assessment of the importance of marginalized women for ethnic women writers, her observations are applicable to Morrison and Jones as well. She contends that they "know that the marginal woman is an outsider, often a social pariah, but they acclaim her as a heroic seeker of a new selfhood that eschews both conformity and calculated mockery" (87). Though important, the blues woman's nonconformity is not without its complications. Though a cursory examination of blues lyrics and *Sula*'s actions would suggest that she is a figure guilty of unconscionable acts, the blues woman not only exhibits moral agency but in many instances she attempts to elevate her sister to the same level of autonomy and in so doing, serves a vital social function within black communities. While some of the blues

woman's exploits are problematic to say the least, a careful reconsideration of these deeds is essential to challenge hegemonic discourses of prescriptive gender roles, appropriate sexuality, and so forth. According to Angela Davis, "whether we listen to these [blues] musicians today primarily for pleasure or for purposes of research-which is not to suggest that pleasure is without its critical dimensions or that research is without its pleasures-there is a great deal to be learned from their bodies of work about quotidian expressions of feminist consciousness" (xvii). If we accept Davis' claim as true, and I do, one of the greatest things we learn is that the blues woman is one of the most ubiquitous figures in African American literature and culture because she exhibits a defiant and feminist sensibility, but also because she articulates a progressive spiritual and sexual politics.

Equally important, by critically examining the real and/or fictional narratives of such women we learn that a greater sensitivity is needed when assessing the interpersonal relationships of characters in part, because as Morrison herself acknowledges, "We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classically, mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago" ("Rootedness" 341 qtd. in Smith 6). And so, a greater understanding of the life and death, the myth and reality of Ursa, Sula, and the blues woman's relationship to her community in many ways becomes an allegory for our own lives. As such, we can contribute to the process of making meaning that these women encourage such that these blues women, inadvertently, become mentors for us all.

CHAPTER FOUR: “BLACK GIRLS LOST: GHOSTLY GIRLS AS SPIRITUAL GUIDE”

*“Those who are dead are never gone:
they are there in the thickening shadow.
The dead are not under the earth:
they are in the tree that rustles,
they are in the wood that groans;
Those who are dead are never gone:
they are in the breast of the woman,
they are in the child who is wailing
and in the firebrand that flames.
The dead are not under the earth:
they are in the forest,
they are in the house.
The dead are not dead. (Birago Diop, 1961)*

“Hilton was seven when his grandmother died, and it was a bad time. But it was worse when she died again” (Due 1). The opening line of Tananarive Due’s novel *The Between* sets the stage for much of the psychological tension that permeates the novel. The adult Hilton James, much like the seven-year old, intuitively understands the difference between life and death but the novel continuously blurs the lines making it difficult for both Hilton and the reader to differentiate the two, which subsequently causes a host of complex emotional and mental problems for the protagonist. Similarly, Helen Oyeyemi’s novel opens with a young girl, eight-year old Jessamy Harrison, who is as confused and perplexed as Hilton. Unlike Hilton, her problems are not brought on by the trauma of seeing a grandparent die, twice. Rather, her problems coincide with the onset of puberty, which indicates that much of the confusion Jess experiences is wrought by maturation. Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl* opens with Jessamy in a cupboard, which serves as a literal and metaphoric sanctuary for the child. Once she is forced to leave the cupboard and engage with the real world her problems begin in earnest.

Because both Due and Oyeyemi's novels feature young characters who develop over the course of the narrative, the tendency would be to place them in the tradition of the bildungsroman and indeed, they are coming of age narratives in some respects; however, given the import of spirituality in interpreting these texts, I suggest that they be read as spiritual apprenticeship novels instead. While a compelling argument can be made that there are scientific or medical explanations for Hilton James' condition, he, much like Jessamy, suffers from a problem that is ultimately spiritual in nature and thus, requires a spiritual solution. Due's protagonist may suffer from schizophrenia, as the novel alludes to, or perhaps even sleep paralysis, a phenomenon that David Hufford explores extensively in *The Terror That Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions*. As tidy and useful as such explanations may seem, these novels imply that such explanations are insufficient in identifying the underlying nature of the problems and are therefore, ineffectual in treating them. Rather than accept explanations grounded in Western epistemologies, the novels largely reject them and instead, embrace the more ambiguous, complex resolution provided by West African spiritual belief systems. In addition to these novels' emphasis on the liminal phase that one or more of the characters gets suspended within, the presence of a child or childlike spirit who contributes to the development of one or more of the characters establishes the texts as spiritual apprenticeship narratives. Most importantly, the novels generally reject accepted scientific or medical explanations for the psychological problems experienced by Hilton James and Jessamy Harrison respectively in favor of an alternative provided by West African spirituality. Reading the novels as spiritual apprenticeship narratives illuminates previously unexamined aspects of these narratives.

Although certainly an example of speculative fiction, Tananarive Due's 1995 novel *The Between* might be most appropriately described as gothic horror or postcolonial Gothic because according to David Punter, "postcolonial spaces, worldviews, writers, writings, and reading are inevitably Gothic, since they, like the geographies of place and of history, are haunted by the ghosts of those who were hidden and silenced in the colonial and imperial past" (qtd. in Wisker 402). Indeed *The Between* is the story of one man's perpetual haunting. The story's protagonist is Hilton James, a community activist, husband, and father of two. At the beginning of the novel, Hilton recounts the story of how his grandmother saved his life before she died the second time. Although it is possible that seven-year old Hilton's senses could be deceiving him, he is positive that his grandmother is dead because when he touches her she feels "as cold as just-drawn well water. As cold as December. He'd never touched a person who felt that way, and even as a child he knew only dead people turned cold that" (Due 2). Yet to his surprise once he returns with the neighbor, his grandmother is alive and well. Over the course of the next year Hilton fears his grandmother because the memory of her cold clammy skin is vivid in his mind. Hilton's fear morphs into gratitude when his elderly, frail grandmother fights back massive waves to save him from drowning. Years later, once Hilton is an adult, the memory of his cadaver like grandmother and his near death experience continue to haunt him. Unfortunately, because he has suppressed the memories, they manifest themselves physically, namely in Hilton's insomnia and delusions.

When we are first introduced to the adult Hilton James', it is easy to believe that his problems and disturbing behavior have physical causes. He is a devoted husband and

father, but he also is the overworked director of a drug rehabilitation center. In addition to the pressures of work and family life, Hilton's stress becomes aggravated when his wife Dede, a judge in Miami, starts to receive cryptic letters and death threats. That Hilton suffers from exhaustion and sleep deprivation is a given; however, it soon becomes apparent that the visions he sees and hallucinations he has are not the result of a lack of sleep. The onset of his physical and mental symptoms coincides with the approach of his 37th birthday and while under hypnosis in an interview with Raul, Hilton says that he's being followed. After further prompting he tells Raul that "the others" are upset with him and want him gone because "no one is meant to live in the between. They thought the hearse would take care of it, but I fled again. Now it's nearly time for another birthday. I've stolen thirty birthdays from them. That's why they sent him" (Due 208). Although Hilton does not understand the meaning of these statements when he utters them, they do imply that something deeper than lack of sleep is at the root of his problem.

Hilton's paranoia, delusions, and general disorientation might be caused by any number of conditions but given that the novel draws largely from West African spirituality it seems unlikely. One possibility is proffered by Hilton's friend and psychiatrist, Raul, who suggests that Hilton exhibits behaviors that are schizophrenic (Due 209). Hilton's symptoms indicate that he might also be suffering from a condition referred to as sleep paralysis. Briefly, sleep paralysis can be defined as "a type of lucid dream in which the dreamer is generally not aware they are dreaming but rather they perceive themselves to be awake and in their bed. They also feel paralyzed, have difficulty breathing, feel pressure on the chest and often sense the presence of a being in the room with them" (Love 50). Indeed, Hilton's inability to sleep mostly stems from a

fear that if he falls asleep he won't be able to distinguish his dream from reality. There might still be other plausible medical explanations but initially Hilton firmly rejects those saying, "I don't believe it. I know it makes sense to you, but not to me. It's something else...The answer is in my dreams..." (Due 211). Since Hilton believes the answers are in his dreams he seeks out Raul's brother Andres because he believes he can provide him with greater insight (i.e. a spiritual explanation) into his situation.

After the unsatisfactory diagnosis from Raul, Hilton seeks out Raul's brother Andres, an eccentric character with spiritual insights. When Andres tells Hilton that he reminds him of a young woman he knew who consulted a houngan (i.e. vodou priest) that told her she was the walking dead, Hilton is dismissive and all but scoffs at Andres' explanation. Consequently, Hilton reluctantly accepts Raul's physiological explanation for his condition and begins taking medication for schizophrenia. Shortly after starting medication, Hilton goes to see his aunt and uncle who raised him after his grandmother died. He discovers that his heart actually stopped beating during his near drowning incident and his uncle had to resuscitate him. Hilton then realizes that because he has somehow cheated death he must undo the damage to his family by sacrificing himself lest his family will have to pay the penance of returning the years he has stolen. At the close of the novel he has died, his spirit is walking with Nana, and he is holding his daughter's pin. Her face is hazy in his mind, and he can only remember that the pin belongs to someone he loves.

One of the defining features of the spiritual apprenticeship narrative is the prominence and significance of liminal spaces or phases in these texts. *The Between* is no exception. The novel intimates the importance of such spaces early through Nana who

hovers between life and death, and indeed all the characters who are on the brink of death suggest the significance of these phases. While under hypnosis, Hilton tells Raul that “the others” are upset with him because “[he has] the gift of flight” and “because [he] can always find doorways, like Nana could.” He goes on to say that they are jealous of him and want him gone because “no one is meant to live in the between” (Due 208). Prior to uttering these rather cryptic statements, Hilton references journeys and the exhaustion they cause. This mirrors an earlier statement an elderly man in Hilton’s facility makes when he encourages Hilton not to worry because “when you’re traveling, it only seems like dreams. Worse than dreams. But they’re not real. They’re journeys [and] all journeys make you tired” (Due 191). The continued invocation of the journey motif is important in its emphasis on the liminal because a journey consists of indeterminate space between one’s starting point and his or her destination; however, the doubling is also significant because “questioning the role of mythic characters, horror figures, and events, zombies, vampires, fissures, twinning, mirrors, and so on can help layer in a natural tendency to read not merely for the face value of the narrative, but also for the dimension of what else it represents and argues” (Wisker 405). The elderly man as a twin like figure combined with Hilton’s ghostly doppelgangers emphasize that the narrative works on dual levels, the literal and symbolic, but also the doubling suggests that the narrative tells Hilton’s story and simultaneously subverts it-while the novel is about his maturation, it is also about his regression in a very literal way.

The stress on the liminal becomes most apparent during Hilton’s conversation with Raul’s brother. Andres describes Marguerite’s encounter with the houngan to Hilton telling him that “The houngan told her she walked between life, death, and the gods. She

was unnatural, he said. She was between” (Due 230-231). Hilton recognizes part of this language and tells Andres about his experience under hypnosis and he adds that he frequently referenced doorways. In response, Andres explains that he and Marguerite had come to the conclusion that the doorways were the key to understanding her situation (Marguerite suffers dreams/delusions similar to Hilton’s). Like Hilton, Marguerite often had encounters that she knew were real with people but when she asked about them, they would deny the incident ever occurred. Andres describes it thus:

It’s like Marguerite walked between natural worlds and spirit worlds. From what she said, if there’s more than one doorway to a spirit, maybe there’s more than one natural world. More than one reality. Say Marguerite really did die in that fall, in one version of reality. Her spirit fled to another doorway, to another version. And everything was fine until she slept. Then her dreams were like a bridge between the worlds, and she always had to run because she knew she was supposed to be dead. (Due 233)

Because Gothic texts often center on liminal spaces, it is only natural that we see repeated and sustained discussion of doorways in the novel. Indeed these spaces, “tend to be doorsteps or windows through which you do or do not invite in the ghost or vampire; windows against which ghosts scratch [...]; and the liminal spaces of existence, hovering between being and unbeing, dead and undead. These liminal spaces and the interruptions in calm, often threatened complacency, in authorized views or orthodoxies, are figured as interstices” (Wisker 412). It is by way of this idea of the doorway as interstice that Andres is trying to explain Marguerite’s experience to Hilton; however, because Hilton has not yet appropriately developed he is not ready to accept Andres’ assistance; thereby preventing his maturation, though not for want of trying on Andres’ part.

Throughout the text we are shown that Hilton needs guidance, perhaps because of the trauma of losing his grandmother and his own near death experience as a youth. Consequently, rather than there being one spiritual mentor in the novel there are many; Nana, Andres, and Kaya, to a lesser extent, all help Hilton come to understand the liminal phase that he is trapped in and accordingly, to accept that he must die as a way to escape it. Although Andres' story about Marguerite may play the most direct role in Hilton's decision, he certainly is not the only character who aids in Hilton's development and subsequent freedom, which in this novel is represented by his death.

Two reasons Andres makes an ideal spiritual mentor for Hilton is that he teaches Hilton to embrace death and he encourages him to accept the validity of a spiritual explanation for his "condition." Initially upon meeting Andres, Raul's brother, Hilton is shocked at his youth, believing that his age might equal inexperience and naïveté but after briefly recounting the story of Nana's deaths and his *déjà vu*/delusions, Andres is convinced that he can help Hilton or at least provide him with some insight into his situation. Andres tells Hilton that he started college late because he spent several years nursing a close friend who was dying of AIDS. During that time he gained a greater insight into and a desire to learn more about death (Due 228). He explains to Hilton some of what he has been exposed to as a result of working with the near death:

What I discovered, even with Bryan [the friend who died of AIDS], is that everybody has different superstitions about death. He was Cuban, and his mother believed in Santeria-in Chango, the war god; and in Hermano Jose', the ghost of the old black slave who talks to the Cuban soothsayers. It's all the religion the Africans took with them to Cuba. So I've been interviewing people about their beliefs, gathering everything I can on death culture and near-death experiences. I've heard some freaky stories, believe me. But I'm a student, not a practitioner. This place is too thick

with spirits for me, with the Cubans and their santeros and the Haitians with their Vodun. I only observe, and listen. So, I learn. (Due 229)

In addition to illuminating the cultural and religious diversity of the Miami community, Andres' statement, and Tananarive Due's by extension, reaffirms the value of these religious orientations. Although he is not an adherent to either of these belief systems, unlike his brother who has been tutored in Western epistemes as a result of his psychiatric training, Andres is not dismissive of them either. Andres' respect for the beliefs of those who are dying or believe they are dying draws Marguerite, a young woman with problems comparable to Hilton, to him. He in turn shares Marguerite's story with Hilton hoping it will help him as well. The insight into Marguerite's death that Andres provides probably has the most profound impact on Hilton but it is also the information that he is most unwilling to accept.

Much like Hilton's family who feels hopeless, Marguerite's family eventually turn to a *houngan* for help when typical medical and psychiatric treatments cannot help her. A *houngan* is a Vodou priest charged with leading ceremonies, overseeing funerals, and conducting healing rituals among other things (Rhodes 318). In spite of his purported abilities concerning spiritual and religious matters, he is a last resort for Marguerite's family who are a "conservative family. Not superstitious at all" (Due 230). Here Andres identifies one of the binaries that dominates the novel: beliefs grounded in the tangible and the observable versus those based outside the natural world. Because Raul, with all his Western education, was unable to assist Marguerite they finally sought an alternative spiritual orientation for a solution. Marguerite's *houngan* told her that "she walked between life, death, and the gods. She was unnatural, he said. She was between"

(Due 230-31). Although Hilton cannot vividly recall his dreams, the words strike him as familiar but he discounts this as a conceivable explanation because unlike Marguerite, Hilton doesn't think he has died because he cannot recall his brush with death when he was resuscitated after the near drowning incident. After hearing more about Marguerite, some of Kaya and her friend Antoinette's statements make sense to him, but he is still unwilling to accept what such statements might mean. Although he is not wholly successful in helping Hilton accept his fate, Andres' most useful role as spiritual mentor may be in reminding Hilton that all life has a purpose. Rather than accepting the more obvious explanation for Marguerite's death, Andes says, "Maybe saving them [her cousins] was why she'd stayed behind all along, cheating death. Those children would have died if she hadn't been there" (233). Hilton seems to staunchly denounce Andres' explanation for his own condition but eventually, at the novel's close, he comes to understand the veracity of Andres' tale.

The complexity of Hilton's situation and subsequent search for answers have led scholars including Christopher Okonkwo to convincingly argue that Hilton is an *ogbanje* or an *abiku*/born to die. In West African cosmology an *ogbanje* is believed to be a spirit child but Chickwenye Ogunyemi contends, "*ogbanje* refers to the iconoclast, the one who runs back and forth from one realm of existence to another, always longing for a place other than where s/he is. It also refers to the mystical, unsettled condition of simultaneously existing in several spheres" (qtd. in Bryce 62). Catherine Acholonu further explains that a child may be referred to as an *ogbanje* when "his [or her] behavior is ambiguous, when he [or she] is difficult to deal with, and above all when there are indications of a dual personality" (qtd. in Bryce 62). Regardless of Hilton's advanced

age, given his erratic behavior and disturbing mental state throughout the novel, a compelling case can be made for his spirit origins.

In addition to the Hilton/Andres binary in the novel, another equally important pairing is that of Kaya and Antoinette. In spite of the possibility of reading Hilton as a spirit child, indeed he very well may be, two equally important spirit children in the narrative, are the two young girls. The friendship of Kaya (Hilton's daughter) and Antoinette (a young girl dying of AIDS) is one of the most significant yet overlooked relationships in the novel. Interestingly however, the notion of one girl serving as the spiritual mentor for the other is complicated because both girls possess a connection to the otherworldly so it is hard to say who mentors whom. More likely, both girls advise and aid other characters in the novel: Antoinette aids Kaya, who in turn, assists her father by providing him with insights into his own complex situation. The girls' importance in the novel is twofold: because both young women are on the threshold between childhood and adulthood their presence emphasizes the significance of the liminal phase within the narrative. Simultaneously, they also inadvertently serve as spiritual guides for Hilton.

Kaya's inherent spirituality is apparent at birth when she is named at the insistence of her Ghanian grandmother who believed a spirit of death lingered over her granddaughter when she was born (Due 147). Consequently, she is bestowed a traditional name on her, "Kaya," which loosely translates "stay and don't go back" (Due 144). Such names were often bestowed on children believed to be *ogbanje* or *abiku* so that they would not die young or enter a cycle of dying and being reborn that was often attributed to such children. The supernatural quality that imbues Kaya cannot be easily explained solely by virtue of being Hilton's daughter (himself a supernatural entity of sorts)

because Jamil, Kaya's brother, does not possess the same intuition and foresight that define Kaya and which allow her to communicate with the dead.

Kaya and Antoinette's friendship begins when Hilton takes his daughter to work with him one day. Instead of going to the cafeteria or waiting room, Kaya insists on accompanying her father thinking the girl might like company from someone her own age and because "[she'd] never met anybody with AIDS" (Due 71). That Kaya is drawn to someone so close to death may be telling in itself. The girls' burgeoning friendship, though brief, is crucial for both their developments. While discussing the merits of a then popular rap duo, "Kid 'N Play," Hilton notices both girls:

He'd never seen Kaya so self-directed, so deft in social relations. He knew she had to be nervous and sad and sickened just like he was, but he could hear none of those things in her hurried, casual tones as she tried to draw conversation out of Antoinette. Kaya's eyes smiled above her mask enabling the barrier between them to disappear. Antoinette told Kaya she liked Luther Vandross, and her favorite was "A House is Not a Home." Hilton didn't know these things about her, would never have known. They sounded like instant friends. And he could see the difference on Antoinette's face, softening her gaunt features, making the worried lines above her forehead vanish, if only for a time. (Due 73)

Such a seemingly innocuous conversation is significant not only because it reveals the importance of close female relationships for both characters but also because it shows that those relationships bring out the best in each girl. In mere minutes in Antoinette's presence, Hilton learns things about his daughter that he hadn't learned in years.

Similarly, Hilton notices that Kaya's presence eases Antoinette's anxiety and tension.

Kaya and Antoinette's exchange is also noteworthy because of its influence later in the novel. After realizing that Antoinette's death is inevitable, Kaya decides against attending a school for the arts and instead, says she wants to pursue science so that she

can become a researcher to find cures for diseases such as AIDS (Due 76). More importantly, because Antoinette feels gratitude for Kaya's friendship she wants to reciprocate even after she has died. Antoinette tries to help Kaya by visiting her in her dreams and telling her to avoid Charles Ray, who is the man trying to kill their family. Although Kaya transposes the words and think she needs to avoid Ray Charles, she finds Kaya's presence more comforting than frightening in the same way that Kaya's friendship helped Antoinette achieve a calm and peacefulness before death. Perhaps the most important piece of information Antoinette communicates to Kaya is concerning her dad. Kaya tells her father, "she said everything will be all right if you just rest and stop fighting. She promised Daddy" (Due 169). Kaya further elaborates saying, "she said if you stop fighting, you'll be able to sleep from now on. Forever, she said" (Due 170). Kaya seems oblivious to the underlying meaning of Antoinette's words but Hilton is not. Antoinette's ramblings about doorways and sleep, which seem cryptic to Kaya, make all too much sense to Hilton because they mirror many of his own thoughts/dreams, and until hearing them echoed back to him by his daughter he is able to continue on in denial.

Although Due suggests that the dominant metaphor in the novel is the fear of death, the novel does much more (Glave 701). That the novel opens with a poem by Emily Dickinson and then ends with a Ghanaian proverb sets up the contrasting character that dominates the novel. The juxtaposition of America (represented by Dickinson) and Africa (represented by Ghanaian writer Abena Busia) is just one of many dichotomies in the novel, the most obvious being the spiritual/temporal binary. Equally important, however, is the dynamic quality of the novel itself. Part One begins with Busia's "Exiles" which speaks volumes. The "unburied dead" who Busia references in the poem

cannot return “home” to Africa because of their displacement, hence their spirits, much like Hilton’s, are exiles. As such, the novel’s unique African American tale is situated between Africa on both sides. The literal “betweenness” of the narrative, coupled with the liminal state of many of the characters, form a powerful metaphor for how we should read the novel, I believe. Hilton, as the quintessential African American, and all others like him are in a constant state of unrest because they are always existing between two worlds, if not more. And like Hilton, we internalize these tensions, often with debilitating emotional and psychological results. Helen Oyeyemi’s protagonist may best exemplify this betweenness and the complications that arise from such rootlessness. A spiritual mentor can help ameliorate some issues, but as Jessamy Harrison reveals, he or she does not completely eradicate such problems.

Helen Oyeyemi’s 2005 *The Icarus Girl* tells the story of eight-year-old Jessamy Harrison, who struggles to overcome emotional and perhaps psychological problems. Her physical displacement between Nigeria, her mother’s birthplace, and England where she currently resides mirrors her mental confusion. In fact, she is frequently criticized for her inability to reconcile both aspects of her identity. One classmate rudely offers, “maybe Jessamy has all the ‘attacks’ because she can’t make up her mind whether she’s black or white” (Oyeyemi 90). At a time when she is struggling to adjust to school and feeling out of place among her Nigerian family she meets a friend, Titiola, who she calls Tilly Tilly. Although she initially seems to be the perfect complement to Jess (she’s confident where Jess is shy, she has physical strength where Jess is weak), she becomes vindictive and spiteful as Jess starts to develop agency and mature. Eventually, Jess comes to understand that others cannot see TillyTilly. More disturbing, however, is that TillyTilly claims to be

the spirit of Jess's deceased twin, Fern. When Jess asks her mother if she did in fact have a sister who died, her mom confirms that it is true. After the mom informs her father of some of the more disturbing episodes Jess has been having (which Jess attributes to TillyTilly), Jess' grandfather implies that these events are occurring because Sarah (Jess' mother) did not complete the necessary ritual needed to appease the spirit of the deceased twin.

Towards the end of the novel, Tilly forces her presence into Jess' body so that she too can live. At one time, Jess mistakenly believed that if she were like Tilly she would have power and freedom like never before; however, Jess' displaced soul or spirit realizes that this is not the case. Unlike Jess's parents, her grandfather is not fooled and recognizes the deception as soon as he hears Tilly, in Jess' body, speaking Yoruba perfectly. Despite Jess' desire to speak the language like her mother, Jess was not a native speaker and never spoke the language with such ease and fluency as Tilly, no matter how she tried. After repeatedly asking Sarah, "where is your daughter?", Jess' grandfather says they need to take Jess to a medicine woman. Both the mother and father object and to end the antagonism between her father and husband, Sarah plans a trip to Lagos to visit family the next day. An unexpected car accident lands Jess/Tilly in the hospital, and while Jess' physical body lies unconscious in the hospital, her spirit desperately tries to figure out a way to escape the bush. At the novel's close Jessamy is in the process of returning to her body and the final sentence announces that Jessamy "woke up and up and up and up" (224), much like the mythical Icarus who continues to ascend to greater heights despite his father's warnings. Indeed, much like Icarus' father, Jess' deceased twin disapproval when the narrative proclaims, "she didn't hear the silent sister-

girl telling her that it wasn't the right way, not the right way at all" (Oyeyemi 334). As such, the optimism of Jess's return to her own body is tempered by the Icarus reference at the end causing the ending to be more ambiguous than satisfying for critics and readers alike.

In a similar manner as *The Between*, *The Icarus Girl* places great emphasis on the liminal, primarily through its exploration of the bush. In the novel, the bush is presented as a separate plane of existence where Jessamy's twin exists, but as "a haunted forest or wasteland, the bush is [also] a symbolic space where solitary male protagonists test their mettle and, implicitly, their masculinity" (Okpewho qtd. in Mafe 21). It has also been considered "an important site and source for modern Yoruba writers" (Mafe 21) and Oyeyemi is no exception. Diana Mafe argues that Oyeyemi's appropriation of this male tradition is strategic and that much "like her literary predecessors, Oyeyemi characterizes the bush as a treacherous realm that must be carefully navigated" (21). The idea of the bush as a space that must be crossed "in order to restore balance to her [Jess's] soul" (Mafe 21) further emphasizes the bush as a threshold (i.e. a liminal space). In addition to the bush, the novel is rife with instances of doorways, windows, and threshold spaces that must be crossed. One such space that must be crossed is the chasm between Nigeria and England, represented by Jess' biraciality.

The narrative's emphasis on the liminal through references to Jessamy's race begins early in the narrative and continues throughout the novel. As with the schoolyard incident referenced previously, Jessamy's classmates often cite her biracial heritage as the cause of her strange and erratic behavior. However, Jess herself suggests that the tension between the two geographic locations is a complex space that must be negotiated.

When thinking about their differences she recalls her mother telling her that in Nigeria “children were always getting themselves into mischief...But her father, who was English [...] insisted that things were different here” (Oyeyemi 6). Consequently, Jess is confused about which behavioral model she should adhere to, the Nigerian one encouraging childhood rambunctiousness or the English one, celebrating passivity. The emphasis on the difference between the two spaces continues when Jess’ mother asks her if she wants to go to Nigeria in an “aeroplane.” If the notion of traveling through time and space to reach the symbolic homeland weren’t powerful foreshadowing already, Jessamy recollects, “if she had known the trouble it [traveling to Nigeria] would cause, she would have shouted ‘No!’ at the top of her voice and run back into the cupboard. Because it all STARTED in Nigeria” (Oyeyemi 7). The ‘it’ in question refers to Jessamy’s displacement and loss of self-caused by her initial encounter and subsequent friendship with Titiola. Similarly, Jess’ names also represent the conflict between the two countries. Although she initially balks at her grandfather’s use of her given Nigerian name, Wuraola, it is still preferable to Jessy. The name, bestowed on her by Tilly in Nigeria, is one that immediately fills Jess with dread and she thinks, “she’d always been Jess or Jessamy, never a halfway thing like Jessy” (Oyeyemi 44). Her observation indicates the inner turmoil that the newly bestowed and ambiguous identity causes for Jess.

Yet another striking indication of the uncertainty surrounding Jess’ complicated identity is Tilly’s occasional possession of Jessamy. In such instances, Sarah’s concerns that she doesn’t recognize or understand this child who is not like her or her husband have an added layer of complexity because Tilly is not their child (Oyeyemi 212). Because, according to Victor Turner, threshold persons are “necessarily ambiguous” and

“neither here nor there” it is understandable that the reader, looking through the lens of the mother’s, eyes is confused about the precise nature of Jess’ identity (Turner 95). What is not so easily discerned is which of the two characters is the liminal entity. Jess obviously exists between two cultures, two races, two nations. Equally unclear is Tilly, who, if we read her as a manifestation that Jess has created, not only exists between the spirit and physical world, she’d also exist between the realm of the flesh and that of the mind. Another possibility is that we should read Jess as Tilly as the ultimate liminal being in the narrative because she at once possesses all of these characteristics. Such an understanding of Jess would suggest that her mother is correct for her fear/revulsion of her daughter because “Jess-who-wasn’t-Jess” is essentially unknowable (Oyeyemi 212).

Perhaps the most salient illustration of the Nigeria/England dichotomy and the indeterminacy they represent is Jess’ strange, undefined sickness. In one of her many bouts with her “illness” Jess runs a high fever and is delirious. Strangely enough, Oyeyemi never characterizes the girl as ailing while in Nigeria, only in England. The notion of Africa as an idealic homeland is complicated, however, by the fact that the malicious Tilly originates in Nigeria. If we accept the proposition made by Dr. McKenzie, Jess’ psychiatrist, and scholars writing about the novel, that Tilly is merely an alter ego that Jess’ has created, it is easier to understand the sudden onset and disappearance of Jess’ poor health. Tilly appears first in Nigeria when Jess feels displaced and initially is her perfect complement. Tilly is Yoruba, unlike Jessy; she is strong where Jess is weak; she is fearless while Jess is afraid. In England then, a place Jess calls home, the lack of a strong alter ego to express her psychological turmoil manifests in the physical ailment Jess suffers from, or at least before Tilly becomes a part

of Jess' life. Indeed, the lack of any clear physical causes for Jess' health problems, support such a reading (Oyeyemi 84); however, the persistence of doubling and ambiguity that permeates the novel rejects such an easy explanation. Although Jess is clearly of the flesh, Tilly is marked from the very being as a spiritual entity and while it is possible that she represents an aspect of the mind, the intangible complement to the brain, the novel's emphasis on myth and Nigerian cultural references makes that seem highly unlikely.

In addition to the mysterious condition that ails Jess, she frequently resorts to tantrums as a means of getting her way. Significantly, after one such episode Sarah and Daniel argue about the most appropriate manner to discipline Jess. Rather than recognizing the metaphor in his wife's words when she tells him he's indulging and spoiling Jessamy, Daniel paraphrases his wife claiming that he supposed she wanted him to "beat her senseless." Sarah responds, "it's just DISCIPLINE! Maybe you just don't understand that! You're turning this into some kind of...some kind of European versus African thing that's all in my mind..." (Oyeyemi 206-07). It is difficult to say which character is projecting their psychological fears about miscegenation onto the other because toward the end of the novel both mother and father stand in agreement that their daughter will not see the local medicine woman that Sarah's father wants to treat Jess (Oyeyemi 326). Their alliance solidifies the contrast between Europe and Africa that the rest of the novel establishes as one of its defining tensions. Sarah, as a product of a Western educational institution, suffers many of the same internal conflicts that plague Jess. Ultimately, she privileges the values of rationality and logic that she would have acquired at University over intuition and perception: traits her grandfather values and

ultimately uses to save Jess from the bush where she is trapped.

Ending the novel with Jess emerging from the bush and flying like the mythical Icarus has profound implications for how we should interpret Jess' identity. Diana Mafe contends, "like the bush landscapes of earlier writers, Oyeyemi's 'wilderness of the mind' integrates Yoruba belief systems with Western myths, literatures, and technologies. [...] Oyeyemi puts the paradigmatic stories of her Yoruba 'elders' to 'wise use' and creates her own next generation narrative of the bush" (21). Helen Oyeyemi *does* create her own unique narrative in that the resolution to Jess' quest for identity and knowledge of self is not to be found in either an African or European model but rather, in a complex combination of both. Although *The Icarus Girl* is about many things including biraciality, binaries, and tensions, that the novel is described as a "narrative of the bush" suggests that readers not only understand what the bush is and represents, but also that the bush is essential in interpreting the other issues present in the novel. Although the most prominent aspect of the novel that the bush alludes to is the tension between Nigeria and England there are several other central binaries and contrasts central to this novel that bear exploring.

The pervasive use of windows, doorways, and doubling, also buttresses the centrality of the liminal phase in interpreting the novel. One important reference to windows occurs shortly after Jess meets Tilly. When Jess inquires as to how Tilly has gotten into her grandfather's library Tilly states simply "the window" (Oyeyemi 58). Jess continues to press for more information because she knows that her grandfather keeps the window locked, but she receives no explanation from Tilly. Tilly's ability to pass through unopened spaces makes her otherworldliness apparent to the reader but this suspicious

characteristic of Tilly is still oblivious to Jess at this point in the narrative. Other liminal spaces include the doorways Jess must pass through when she first seeks out Tilly (Oyeyemi 78). Jess' reduction of Titiola's name to the simpler TillyTilly is certainly one of the first instances of echoing in the novel but there are many more. This mirroring continues as the reader sees Tilly becoming more like Jess as the novel progresses, initially simply in looks but later in practice as Tilly takes a darker turn when she attempts to usurp Jess' spirit with her own. As intelligent as Jess is said to be, her naiveté when it comes to Tilly makes the argument that she is merely an alter ego that Jess has created all the more persuasive.

Rather than being alarmed at seeing her friend in England and dressed surprisingly like Jess, the young girl is delighted and eagerly accepts Tilly's explanation that she has moved with her parents (Oyeyemi 94-5). Similarly, after Tilly tells Jess that they are twins, Jess comes to understand that Tilly is of the spirit world because she realizes "that TillyTilly and the long-armed woman were somehow the same person, like the two sides of a thin coin" (Oyeyemi 171). Similarly, upon realizing that they'd both lost a twin, TillyTilly says, "we're twins to each other now...we've got to look after each other. We're twins, best friends" (Oyeyemi 175). Such occurrences become a way for Oyeyemi to embody the inherent twoness of Jess and Tilly such that one identity becomes bifurcated and must be represented by two different entities. Perhaps the most significant instance of twinning in the novel is the literal one: Jess' discovery that she had a twin sister, Fern, who is now deceased. Although she doesn't figure largely in the narrative, her absence is as important as her presence. Because many African societies associate magical power with twins, Fern's absence provides the reader with yet another

possibility for Jess' strangeness/uniqueness. As the missing part of Jess' whole, Fern's death could have fractured Jess' identity because of the severed connection between she and her twin.

Central to the spiritual apprenticeship narrative is the presence of one or more spiritual mentors for the protagonist. *The Icarus Girl*, like *The Between* proffers several interesting possibilities: Tilly, Shivs, and Jess' grandfather. When Tilly makes Jess aware that she had a twin, Jess mistakenly thinks that perhaps Tilly is the spirit of that twin; however, the aid that Jess' sister provides to her in the bush usurps such a possibility entirely. Because Tilly's spirits has displaced Jess' she requires assistance to return to her own body. This aid is rendered by a number of characters. Naturally, since Tilly was the one who ejected Jess from her own body, she was not one of these figures. As malevolent of a spirit as Tilly turns out to be, she initially appears to Jess at a time when she needs to be empowered. After arriving in Nigeria, Jess is overwhelmed by the unfamiliarity of her surroundings and the strangeness of her extended family. In meeting (or in creating) Tilly, Jess feels that she has found a kindred spirit because she too is a little girl who seemingly lacks a close relationship with either family or friends. One of the many traits that Tilly encourages in Jess is fearlessness. When Jess balks at going into her grandfather's study because it is dark, Tilly assures her that she has nothing to worry about; when Tilly "drew her [Jess] into the darkness, [...] she wasn't at all afraid because someone was holding her hand" (Oyeyemi 55). The darkness that Tilly draws Jess into is a rather profound metaphor because while on the one hand, Tilly encourages Jess to embrace her dark side, she simultaneously encourages her that she doesn't have to be afraid of the unknown. For this reason, when Tilly asks Jess if she would like to be like

her, Jess thinks that she wants to because she equates Tilly with being powerful, fearless, and adventurous (Oyeyemi 75). Unfortunately Jess and Tilly mean two very different things because Tilly knows that her power is derived from the spirit world whereas Jess does not.

Like Tilly, Shivs also makes for an interesting possibility as Jess' mentor. As another young girl who is approximately Jess' age, Shivs also serves as a twin of sorts because many of Jess' uncertainties are reflected back onto her as she considers her friend's difference from herself and others around her. The text substantiates such an interpretation of Shivs because when Jess is lost in the metaphoric wilderness at the end of the novel, Shivs help guide her back to a state of consciousness. Jess' recalls that "she had stopped flying and had fallen a long time ago, and didn't know the way" (Oyeyemi 331). Fortunately, however, she has Shivs. She remembers, "Something the person carrying her was Siobhan (Shivs), red hair brilliant against the delicate white of her naked skin only she knew it wasn't Siobhan really" (Oyeyemi 331). Though Jess may rightly believe that she is only encountering an illusion of Shivs, she is in a place that is both real and illusory, yet another liminal space in the narrative. In such a space, a duplicate of Shivs or Shivs' spirit self is the equivalent of the actual girl. As such, her understanding of Jess and her friendship with Jess still enables her to help usher her friend to safety. Accordingly, Shivs' spirit keeps encouraging Jess' spirit to return to her physical body reminding her that "we're nearly there" (Oyeyemi 331).

More likely, the most compelling argument can be made for Jess' grandfather as spiritual mentor. Like Morrison's ancestral figure, the elder Nigerian ultimately aids in the development and maturation of the novel's protagonist, Jessamy Harrison in this

case.¹ Early on, the grandfather seems to possess prescience when it comes to his granddaughter. When he tries to explain Jess' mother's behavior to the girl he almost foreshadows Jess' own predicament saying, "Sometimes I think that she doesn't know what she's doing at all, but she follows some other person inside her that tells her to do things that make no sense. There is no other way that someone could be so very stubborn, and not pay" (Oyeyemi 28). It could be that the grandfather's words are only applicable to Sarah because part of her irresponsible behavior would include not commissioning the carving of an ibeji statue for Jess' twin. Sarah eventually comes to believe that not observing this important rite might have caused Jess' emotional and psychological problems. More likely, however, the grandfather's comments are probably in reference to both his daughter and granddaughter because he himself observes that "[they] are [both] the same" (Oyeyemi 29). In this light, the grandfather foreshadows Tilly's presence in Jess' life.

Beyond making cryptic observations about his descendants, the grandfather is frequently called upon to mitigate problems with Jess by counseling Sarah on appropriate courses of action to help his granddaughter thus, inadvertently serving as a mentor for Jess. One such instance is when he counsels Jess about her mysterious friend:

"Wuraola." Her grandfather's voice was serious now.

"Mmmm?"

"Two hungry people should never make friends. If they do, they eat each other up. It is the same with one person who is hungry and another who is full: they cannot be real, real friends because the hungry one will eat the full one. You understand?"

"Yes grandfather." She was scared now, because she knew he wasn't talking about food-hungry. She almost understood what he was saying;

¹ Morrison, Toni. "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)*. Ed. Mari Evans. New York: Anchor Press, 1984.

she was sure of it. (Oyeyemi 249)

Shortly after this exchange with her grandfather, Jess tells her mother that she is not hungry, furthering the analogy between she and Tilly. Presumably Sarah has shared accounts of Jess' strange behavior with the father and he attempts to use his intuition and/or spiritual insights to help his granddaughter overcome the psychological or spiritual ordeal she is wrestling with. The ending of the narrative further intimates that without his intervention, Jess may well have succumbed to the very real danger that Tilly represents. When no one else recognizes that Jess has been possessed, the grandfather immediately comprehends and begins to act. After consulting the local medicine woman and following her instructions to place Fern's *ibeji* carving in the hospital room with Jess, the grandfather is satisfied that he has secured safe passage for his granddaughter's spirit to return to her body (Oyeyemi 330). The narrative then proclaims, "when he'd gone, the *ibeji* statue...guarded the corner for the little twin who needed its help, needed the forgiveness it brought, needed to win more than ever" (Oyeyemi 331). Seemingly the novel corroborates the success of this action because Fern's spirit, among others, helps Jess return to her body. In this instance, the grandfather very literally serves as a spiritual mentor in that he ultimately serves as a spiritual guide for both Fern and Jess, acting as an intermediary for the absent medicine woman.

As with *The Between*, *The Icarus Girl* proffers possible sensible (i.e. scientific) explanations for much of the psychological trauma that Jess undergoes in the novel. In part, the use of what might be termed magical realism or Postcolonial gothic in the creation of a figure like TillyTilly has as much to do with the writer's narrative technique as it does their desire to advance the plot of the novel in a particular manner. Indeed,

writers such as Oyeyemi use these strategies to exacerbate the tensions they face as black female writers who also strongly identify with Europe (Cooper 53). In a sense, much like their protagonists they experience a fragmentation of sorts, “when this struggle drives them mad the belief in the magical itself because muted” hence explanations for supernatural occurrences within the novels are attributed to “scientific” reasons (Cooper 53-4). We see this resoundingly when Shivs’ father and even Jess’ parents attempt to explicate Jess’ problems through a more Eurocentric framework rather than an African one. Rather than accept her own inclinations towards believing Tilly is a malicious spirit, Sarah reluctantly accepts an explanation that she knows her father would scoff at. When Dr. McKenzie explains that he believes Jess may have created an alter ego, as much as Sarah may be appalled she, as a product of a Western educational system that needs to label and define things in ways that make sense from a logical perspective, embraces this reason because it would mean that Jess can exert some measure of control over her, or her alter ego’s behavior (Oyeyemi 292). Such a rationalization firmly suggests that Jess’ behavior and identity are entirely of her control rather than being predetermined by outside forces.

Arguably Tananarive Due and Helen Oyeyemi both “occupy an ambiguous space of contested citizenship” (Cooper 51). One author’s ambiguity arises because of her persistent efforts to resist patriarchy by continually making her contributions in a male dominated genre; the other’s displacement arises because of both her geographic and cultural dislocation, traits that her protagonist, Jess, shares with her. The resolution to both novels is equally complex and in some ways, complicates the solutions provided by the spiritual apprenticeship model that I have provided here. The culminating scene in the

novel suggests that while Jess' confusion about her identity is not necessarily redeeming, neither is her desire to become something she is not, an intention that is represented in the novel through Tilly's manifestation and Jess' initial idealism concerning her. Even as a spirit Tilly is wholly Nigerian, but Oyeyemi doesn't necessarily think this is the right path for Jessamy because she rejects the spirit possession proffered by Tilly. Such an ending reveals two very important points. The first is that, as much as this project argues that the presence of one or more spiritual mentors is necessary to help the protagonist pass an important threshold, such a model is not without its problems, as Tilly's succubus like presence in Jess' life reveals. Secondly, and more importantly, because Jess doesn't become her grandfather's Wuraola or her father's Jessamy, Oyeyemi persuades this reader to believe that perhaps Jess' fates lies in neither a Eurocentric nor African worldview but rather some synthesis of two. As such, readers should understand and interpret Jess as existing somewhere in "the between" and accept her as the liminal being that she is.

CHAPTER FIVE: “ANDROGYNOUS ADVISORS: ASSERTIVE WOMEN AS SPIRITUAL GURUS”

“Eshu-Elegbara . . . sometimes ‘wears’ the crossroads as a cap, colored black on one side, red on the other, provoking in his wake foolish arguments about whether his cap is black or red, wittily insisting by implication that we view a person or a thing from all sides before we form a general judgment.”

Flash of the Spirit, Robert Farris Thompson

According to Houston Baker in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American literature: A Vernacular Theory*, one of the dominant themes in the slave narratives of black men has been that of movement, and although Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents of the Life of a Slave Girl* predates my interest in 20th century African American literature, Baker’s comments illuminate important differences in the trope of movement in male and female narratives that continue well into the twentieth century. He contends that black female slave narratives often include an episode where the narrator narrowly avoids rape because of her proximity and resignation to the domestic sphere is juxtaposed with the typical male narrative of physical and male movement, further indicating the man’s transgressive potential (54). The journey motif and the theme of movement figures just as prominently in the writings of black women as black men; however, rather than attempting to navigate a hostile, racist terrain, black women’s journeys, much like the bildungsroman, tend to move them from naïveté to consciousness, and this may or may not be accompanied by physical movement. Baker’s observations about movement and space are not only relevant, but also essential for a consideration of Octavia Butler’s works because many of them assume the neo-slave narrative form. That movement figures so largely in these novels is indicative of the transcendence associated with such movement. Although she

strategically employs movement in *Kindred* and *Wild Seed*, Butler's most profound use of the journey motif occurs in her *Parable* series. In these novels, the characters' journey is metaphoric in that their physical movement augments their spiritual development.

Considering that Octavia Butler's writings most often are categorized as science fiction because of their concern with extraterrestrial life forms and space travel, it is not surprising that travel and movement are essential for interpreting the narratives. Interestingly, although the horrors of slavery, either physically or mentally, are present in these narratives, slavery is often only a minute aspect of the picture Butler is trying to paint for her reader. Consequently, focusing on the novels as solely neo-slave narratives also limits our understanding of the novels. Analyzing the novels through the spiritual apprenticeship narrative framework, however, allows us to explore the centrality of movement, slavery, and African epistemology in these texts. Most importantly, the spiritual apprenticeship label does not preclude the reader from appreciating the theoretical underpinning at the heart of her novels. Namely, Butler's treatment of womanist/Black feminist thought undergirds all the other social and political issues broached in the texts. Through an examination of Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* and her *Parable* series, I argue that the journey motif serves as a metaphor for the transition from naïveté to consciousness. More importantly, I argue that because of their versatility and combination of both masculine and feminine attributes, Octavia Butler's heroines are the ultimate spiritual mentors. By creating these characters, Butler illustrates that to successfully guide both women and men, a teacher must be simultaneously assertive and sensitive to the needs of his or her community.

There is much to love about Butler's 1980 novel *Wild Seed*, which starts out in Africa in the year 1690. Although the novel might be considered a neo slave narrative it resists easy categorization, much like the central figures themselves. The novel is similar to other speculative fiction by women in "its critique of exploitative reproductive arrangements, recovery of magic and witchcraft as forms of women's culture, and celebratory identification of women with animals and nature" (Dubey 354). When an ancient Nubian spirit named Doro feels physically drawn from hundreds of miles away by the special powers/abilities of an old woman called Anyanwu the novel's central conflict of a gendered power struggle begins. This initial meeting presents wonderful challenges and possibilities for both characters to mutually exploit and/or benefit from each other. Anyanwu, who has outlived her children, grandchildren, and husbands, sees the possibility of having a companion and of building something lasting with Doro. He, on the other hand, initially sees Anyanwu only as a potential breeder for his genetic experimentation. Over the course of the novel, however, Anyanwu is able to teach Doro the one thing that he cannot learn or acquire through other means: to be human.

Part of the reason Anyanwu's unyielding stance to Doro's patriarchal chauvinism is successful in helping to humanize him is because of Anyanwu's own complex spiritual authority. As a conflation of "Atagbusi, Anyanwu, Ala, and Agbala," Christopher Okonkwo argues that Butler's heroine is able to serve as a character foil to Doro in part, because the "Igbo from whom Anyanwu descends, are known to value republicanism over extremism" (*Spirit* 69). In Anyanwu's "rebelliousness on board the *Silver Star* and later in New York (with Doro/Lot's children) and in Louisiana (her liberating Canaan), she maintains her people's antebellum and particularly Igbo women's legacy of

insubordination to ‘foreign’ rule” (Okonkwo *Spirit* 72). The importance of this composite identity is underscored if we read Anyanwu as a female iteration of Legba. Indeed, Okonkwo’s observations about the masculine and feminine Igbo myths that inspire Anyanwu’s character support the supposition that “resistance to fixity and privileging fluidity are fundamental requisites of imaging freer, more inclusive, and fundamentally just societies. It is in this domain of freedom that Legba, the God of the crossing sign, presides” (Russell 13). What Heather Russell emphasizes here is that although there are other orisha, and even other new world manifestations of Esu-Elegbara that might provide an adequate metaphor for the analytical framework she sets forth in *Legba’s Crossing*, unlike Legba, they do not have the connection to revolution and freedom that Legba, because of his Haitian and Caribbean origins, has. In much the same way, because of his ability to be a trickster, to assume either human or animal form, and because he literally sits at the intersection between worlds, Legba’s inherent “twoness” is one of the defining features of Butler’s strong women characters and Anyanwu perfectly embodies these qualities.

Another way that Anyanwu establishes herself as a spiritual mentor is through her use of movement for strategic purposes. In doing so, Butler signifies that movement is not just transcendent for men, as male slave narratives and critics such as Houston Baker suggest. Simultaneously, by reifying images of the devoted mother, she also indicates the importance of traditional matriarchal roles. This is one of the first places where we see signs of Anyanwu’s twoness. By using the mythological apparatus of the shape shifting and gender bending Anyanwu, Butler is able to subtly critique the limitations of both the male and female slave narrative and synthesize the elements of both that resonate with

readers. So although Anyanwu is given to the same concerns about the welfare of her children that keep her in bondage for many years, much as in Harriet Jacobs' slave narrative, her story also reflects her transatlantic and cross continental movement. Because she cannot be physically confined as Jacobs is in her tale, her narrative is more on par with Olaudah Equiano or Frederick Douglas. Her metaphoric journey also suggests that the spirit of the enslaved Africans could not be contained; it too, was transgressive. The fact that movement is essential for understanding the characters' evolution in Octavia Butler's writings has not gone unnoticed by scholars. In reference to *Wild Seed*, Ingrid Thaler makes the following observation:

the novel's moment of resolution, or utopian impulse, can be found in hope for the master's self recognition and recognition of his emotional dependence on the female slave. The novel ends at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Anyanwu announces she moves to California after the Civil War, thereby relocating the North/South nexus to the West, the geographical space in which the novel's future takes place. (43)

Although Thaler's argument here seemingly has more to do with Doro's understanding of his reliance on Anyanwu, what she inadvertently emphasizes is the importance of topography in the narrative. This movement closely correlates with Anyanwu's budding independence. Anyanwu's movement also reveals an important function of spiritual apprenticeship narratives: the disruption of a Eurocentric worldview. The temporal and time shifts, as with other "African Atlantic narratives," depict time and space, not as a linear trajectory, but rather as a cyclical process (Russell 13).

We know that *Wild Seed* begins in Africa in the 17th century, but a series of transcontinental dislocations follow. Although Russell references John Edgar Wideman's *Cattle Killing* in the following description, save the locations, the exact same statement

reflects much of the political and social implications of movement in *Wild Seed*. She writes,

This narrative moves temporally over the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries and geographically across Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and southeast South Africa. Wideman's philosophies regarding the imbrications of time, history, memory, geography, and the imagination... are emblematic of African Atlantic reconfigurations of Western time. Even more significantly, such cross-temporality counters Historical hegemonizing discourses, engaging instead in self-conscious acts of historical revisionism that are requisite for sociopolitical transformation. (Russell 14)

The trajectory of movement in Butler's novel also works to support Western chronology for Diasporic peoples. Anyanwu's southern movement is especially emblematic of the politics associated with geography and movement. Prior to relocating to California, Anyanwu made her home in the South. While guised as a white male plantation owner, it is in this space on a Louisiana plantation that we see Anyanwu perform both race and gender in such a manner as to distort the lines between transgression and hypocrisy, between incongruity and paradox. Madhu Dubey ironically points out that "although he/she actively undermines slavery by buying slaves in order to emancipate them and by helping runaways escape to freedom, the novel raises nagging doubts about the integrity of Anyanwu's opposition to both forms of slavery (reproductive and racial) depicted in the novel" (355-56). Yet, her Louisiana plantation "can survive ...only because she masquerades as a blue-eyed, white, male slave owner" (Dubey 355-56). This complicated matrix of racialized images that Butler conflates in the text is one of the more difficult aspects of the novel to comprehend. Additionally, these images complicate the possibility of analyzing the text solely based on the gender dynamic between the two main characters.

As much as *Wild Seed* is about movement and transcendence it is also about the relationship between a pair of individuals that facilitates the personal or spiritual growth of the other. The main factors that attempt to stymie the maturation of one or both characters is the unspoken tension caused by race and gender. Of these tensions Patricia Melzer's writes, "Butler's representations of difference" serves to undermine "Western construction of dualisms of self and other, based on categories of sameness (normative) and difference (deviant), which form a relationship of power that is naturalized and not open to change" (67). One of the main ways Butler is able to destabilize boundaries such as gender is by conflating genders and species through Doro and Anyanwu, who defy categorization, who can and do choose to be male or female, or who choose to be black or white on a whim. Thus, they blur the lines between humans and gods, between the spirit and flesh, and quite significantly, they conflate the identity of slave and slave owner by changing their race. This knowledge further complicates the nuanced relationship between Doro and Anyanwu because they are both slave owners at some point in the novel. Of the two, however, only Anyanwu rationalizes her slavery as a "community – building enterprise as a process of 'gathering family' rather than 'breeding' (220)" (Dubey 355). Because both central figures have owned slaves it becomes increasingly difficult to identify a singular master/slave dichotomy. Even if such recognition were possible, this would not necessarily translate to a mentor/protégé relationship, nor should it given the historical context that the novel addresses. Indeed, there are numerous places in the novel where Doro's breeding program is described in a way that reduces people to animalistic traits (Dubey 352). For example, when talking with Isaac about the kindness he has shown toward Anyanwu, Doro ruminates on his magnanimity thinking, "he

refrained from preying on her least successful children, refrained from breeding her daughters to her sons-or bedding those daughters himself” (Butler *Wild Seed* 154).

Doro’s choice of words in observing his restraint still suggests that he thinks of his and Anyanwu’s children as little more than chattel that should be bred. Even though he has abstained from it, they are the prey to his predator. Such examples invite readers “to identify the fictive construct of Doro’s slavery with the actual system of slavery that was practiced in the antebellum United States.” Readers further make this identification because “Doro’s breeding colony is located within the historical and geographic context of antebellum slavery, which the novel presents in sharply realist terms” (Dubey 352).

This intricate slavery metaphor significantly impedes the observation of a strong, viable mentoring relationship, just as we might imagine these bonds to be difficult to foster within the context of slavery. Difficult, however, is not the same as impossible.

If Maria Ferreira’s suggestion in “Symbiotic Bodies and Evolutionary Tropes in the Work of Octavia Butler” that Doro is the ultimate parasite is correct, he makes a relationship predicated on mutual respect and understanding difficult at best. More accurately, as one who “survives by consuming both his victims’ psychic energy and their bodies,” he made such relationships impossible because in all the relationships he had before Anyanwu he was often the hunter and his “seed” were victims, his unlikely prey (Ferreira 404). Ferreira furthers this hunting analogy when discussing Anyanwu’s freedom from Doro when she is in animal form, noting Anyanwu’s declaration that “Doro would not enslave her again. And she would never be his prey” (Butler qtd. in Ferreira 409). Ironically, although Ferreira devotes her article to discussing the parasitic nature of Butler’s characters like Doro who consume life rather than give it, she does not

acknowledge the similarities between the enterprise of these characters and chattel slavery. Rather, she looks to biology and the animal kingdom to provide the host/parasite metaphor, neglecting the similarity to slavery, which dehumanizes people, thereby reducing them to the status of host for parasites rather than being fully actualized individuals with agency. Ferreira's recognition that Doro "survives by consuming both his victims' psychic energy and their bodies" and literally wearing them makes the reference to slavery that much more potent (404). Doro, in the guise of a white slaver, uses and discards black bodies and exploits their labor even when he does not literally need their skin.

As much as *Wild Seed* certainly suggests a clear correlation between Doro's breeding program and American chattel slavery, there is some possibility for a critique of the system if we consider the ways his community of Wheatley is different. Perhaps the most notable distinction has to do with why people become members of Doro's slave colony:

If ideologies of immutable difference between African and Caucasian races were institutionalized in antebellum American slavery, Doro's reproductive program is designed to "mix and stir" different races and ethnic stocks (102), so much so that he takes pride in his slave colony as an enclave of 'diversity' within a starkly racialized society (105). In further contrast to the historically specific variant of American slavery, Doro exploits his slaves not for their labor power but for their 'difference,' which inheres in their possession of various kinds of psychic abilities. (Dubey 352)

In much the same way that Anyanwu has justified her ownership of slaves, these lines suggest that Doro has also felt a need to rationalize his keeping of slaves. The most compelling case for the novel's critique of slavery is actually metaphoric and has little to do with slavery in any historically identifiable form. Anyanwu's continued resistance to

Doro, a likely victim of sickle cell anemia by some scholarly interpretations, suggests that Butler rejects that idea of blacks being enslaved by their own physiology. Indeed, beyond the pages of the novel “It [sickle cell anemia] continues to rob African diaspora and in this case black American mothers of their children, nieces and nephews, and siblings of immediate family.” For Butler, this “cycle, that power play, must be protested if not broken. And women, through whose bodies the phenomenon seeks perpetuity, must ultimately have a hand in its cessation” (Okonkwo *Spirit* 68). In this way, Anyanwu’s rejection of Doro’s breeding program becomes a triumph over both a literal and figurative slavery. Equally important, by the end of the novel Doro has learned to appreciate family from Anyanwu so that he no longer views his children solely as stock.

An affinity between race and power becomes apparent in subsequent novels of the *Patternist* series that follow *Wild Seed* and thus, Anyanwu still finds herself in the role of teacher. In *Mind of My Mind*, for example, when Doro and Anyanwu (who now calls herself Emma) have an argument, the conflation of blacks with slavery is revealed even though their society is no longer stratified based on race. Anyanwu points out the similarity to Doro:

“Mutes!”

“...It’s a convenient term. People without telepathic voices. Ordinary people.”

“ I know what it means, Doro...It means niggers!...And if you don’t think they look down on us non-telepaths, us niggers, the whole rest of humanity, you’re not paying attention.” (Butler qtd. in Melzer 82)

Within the storyline of the series, this exchange is presented as being hundreds of years after Doro and Anyanwu’s initial meeting; still, the complicated racial makeup of society and thus, of their world, has not changed significantly. Significantly, despite being the

older of the two, Doro still has to be shown this fundamental similarity between her granddaughter's enterprise and slavery.

Inasmuch as *Wild Seed* and the Patternist series invert or deconstruct the racialized binary of antebellum slavery, gender inequity remains a source of tension in the narrative. Disputes between the characters are wrought, in part, because of the way that both Doro and Anyanwu continually conflate ideas about masculinity and femininity. That Anyanwu is alternately assertive and acquiescent makes it difficult to establish a hierarchical relationship in the novel. Of the novel, Patricia Meltzer makes the following observation:

Butler writes against mainstream perception, in which the subjectivity of women of color, instead of being conceptualized within its own framework, is understood as sentimental and personal. She always remains critical of unambiguous and seemingly unproblematic approaches to dealing with difference and power. Instead of creating fictional relations based on one-dimensional theoretical models, Butler's narratives are infused with contradictions and dilemmas that mirror unresolved conflicts within feminist discourse. (68)

What Meltzer rightly reveals here is that the dynamics of gender and power in the novel are intended to be complicated because on some level they are a microcosm of gender concerns and dynamics within society. Yet in "Octavia Butler's Novels of Enslavement," Madhu Dubey argues that one of the major reasons for Anyanwu transforming into a creature such as the dolphin is because innocence and nature are often conflated. Thus, according to Dubey she seeks "refuge" in a space that is "clearly opposed to patriarchal human society" (Dubey 354). Such a reading seemingly undermines Meltzer's claim by intimating that rather than actually critiquing feminist discourse, the narrative is, at least

in part, a critique of patriarchy. Given the troubling characteristics of both Doro and Anyanwu, it is quite probable that Butler is critiquing both.

To equate animal form with innocence in the novel is also troubling because in one of the most violent scenes in the novel, Anyanwu adopts leopard form because she is threatened, but also because of the power and potential ferocity the animal wields. This exacerbates the power struggle between the Anyanwu and Doro because Doro knows that he cannot control Anyanwu in animal form. Equally upsetting for him is that it is difficult to maintain some modicum of control over her when she is a man. Consequently, their interactions that are most fraught with tension occur when Anyanwu is not in her usual, female, human form because of the unspoken power struggle between the two. An early instance of this occurs when, as a leopard, she accidentally kills Doro's son Lale who intends to rape her. After Doro's kicks her in leopard form she realizes that she could destroy him but before she has even had time to consider if she should kill him, Doro plays on her hesitation, attempting to enforce a hierarchy based on sex. He says, "Come...Kill again. It has been a long time since I was a woman" (Butler *Wild Seed* 81). Later, after she ignores him and continues to consume the flesh of his dead son, he turns to her, "lifted her bodily, and threw her off the corpse When she tried to return to it, he kicked her, beat her" and yells, "Control yourself." "Become a woman!" (Butler *Wild Seed* 81) Such interactions are common in the novel with both characters seeming acceptance of continuing to perform the stereotypical behaviors associated with their biological sex when they were born. Thus, Doro acts the part of the abusive and domineering husband, while Anyanwu plays the role of docile and submissive wife.

Yet there are moments in the novel that again, challenge such easy classifications. Towards the end of the narrative, Doro expresses a longing for the freedom that Anyanwu experiences while in animal form. He could conceivably envy the power and evasiveness of her animal form, but he might also recognize that for all his wisdom, there is a certain knowledge that animals possess that is unavailable to him. Certainly because he is originally from Africa, the wisdom associated with animals would be a fairly common belief that Doro encountered. Another instance that complicates what appear to be reductive gender roles occurs when Doro's son Isaac is trying to convince Anyanwu to accept Doro as her husband. Isaac rationalizes her acquiescence by implying that to the extent that it is possible, she can humanize Doro. According to Isaac, her longevity means that Doro can have a companion for longer than he's ever had and that he needs that even if he doesn't realize this fact. On the surface then, Isaac's plea "Submit to him now Anyanwu, and later, you can keep him from ever making animals of us" seems to reify those masculine/feminine stereotypes referenced previously (Butler *Wild Seed* 139). But her initial thought that submitting to him "brought a wile taste to her mouth" indicates some level of resistance. Anyanwu further acknowledges, "she knew now how the slaves had felt as they lay chained on the bench, the slaver's hot iron burning into their flesh. In her pride, she had denied that she was a slave. She could no longer deny it" (Butler *Wild Seed* 140). Her acceptance at this realization should not be understood as mere passivity. Rather, the narrative reveals a purposefulness to resist Doro's form of slavery and in fact, to ultimately follow Isaac's advice and use Doro's growing reliance on her as a weapon against him. Even her capitulation is defiant, yet another example of Anyanwu's "twoness." Additionally, Isaac's advice ultimately feels prophetic because

she does successfully lead Doro to a better understanding of his nature and his need for others.

In spite of the tensions caused by the thirst for power experienced almost equally at times by the main characters in the story, the novel comes to an uneasy resolution. The reader does not see how the seeds of the violent and destructive eugenics program that Doro has begun creating comes to fruition through one of Anyanwu's granddaughters; however, what we do see espoused at the end of the narrative is the almost cliché idea that perhaps love can concur all. Butler herself argues that "there is a redeeming power in the human spirit, a redeeming power in the human capacity of give, to sacrifice, to love" and that this is one of the few things that can mitigate the damages caused by a force with such "enormous unchecked creative and destructive capability" as Doro (*Wild Seed* 306). Although the focal point of slavery has shifted from a depiction of antebellum chattel slavery in *Wild Seed* to economic slavery by the time readers encounter Octavia Butler's *Parable* series, the issues of gender equity caused by burgeoning female autonomy are ever present. Dubey aptly notes, "the lineaments of a developing political-economic order (of global capitalism) were surely clearer by 1990s than they were during the late 1970s, when *Kindred* and *Wild Seed* were written and when political will seemed mired in uncertainty" (359). Where *Wildseed*, with its otherworldly characters seem surreal at times, Butler's *Parable* series feels almost prescient in its description of a political climate and society that seems eerily similar to our own.

Much like Butler's *Wildseed*, her *Parable* novels are unique because of the importance of journeying in understanding the novels. More importantly, Lauren Olamina's "twoness" exacerbates the tensions between her main protégé; however, it is

this duality that causes her to be a successful spiritual guide to many characters throughout the series. Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* takes place in the year 2024 in post apocalyptic Los Angeles. The story follows Lauren Olamina, a fifteen-year-old African American girl. Lauren is the daughter of a Baptist minister; as a result, at a young age develops her own distinct ideas about religion. Because of her mother's drug use while pregnant, Lauren is also a hyperempath, meaning she imagines she feels the pain of others. When pyromaniacs destroyed her gated community and killed everyone in sight, Lauren escapes. Together with Harry Balter and Zahra Moss, Lauren heads north, picking up a rag tag bunch of followers along the way. This movement early in the novel alludes to the preeminence of the spatial metaphor in the novel. The Robledo community members' forced relocation from their home literally sets the story in motion. Rather than being unselfish travelers seeking to aid others on the highway, the group only allows people to join who are beneficial in some way. For instance, men helped protect the group and Bankole (later to become Lauren's husband) was a doctor so he contributed to the relative health of the group when compared with other groups of highway travelers.

Over the course of the narrative and throughout their travels, Lauren teaches members of the group about Earthseed, a religious philosophy that she asserts is a system of truths that she discovered. It is probably by way of such a progressive religious philosophy that she effectively becomes a spiritual guide for so many; however, at this point in the narrative Lauren and her followers are still at the outset of the literal and figurative journey. Eventually the group reaches Bankole's land just south of Canada. Here Acorn, the first Earthseed community, is formed. Not only does reaching their destination in spite of dangerous and violent circumstances reflect their growth, but this

time also marks the beginning of Lauren's ministry, for lack of a better word. At this point the Acorn community actively begins to teach and practice the Earthseed philosophy with the ultimate goal being to fulfill the Earthseed destiny of taking root among the stars.

Parable of the Talents begins with Lauren Olamina's estranged daughter Asha (née Larkin) telling the remainder of Lauren's narrative in flashback. Since the end of *Parable of the Sower*, Acorn, the first Earthseed community, has grown in number and flourished. Lauren also finds her younger brother Marc, now going by Marcos, who did not die along with the rest of her family, but was rescued after being left for dead. Because they were squatters, the family eventually ended up living in the streets where Marc was found, and subsequently, sold into slavery. However, during his time with his adopted family, the Durans, Marc developed a passion for preaching, intent on following in the footsteps of his father by becoming a Baptist minister. Earthseed contradicted his understanding of Christianity, and this eventually caused his departure from the group. Shortly after, and just as the community begins to thrive, Acorn is attacked and enslaved by the Crusaders, a Christian fundamentalist group that accuses community members of being heathens. As a result, their children are taken from them to be placed in "good" Christian homes. After a storm deactivates the slave collars that Lauren's community is forced to wear, they are then able to kill their captors and escape. Lauren eventually finds her brother, who has become a prominent figure in the Christian America movement, and recounts her story. Predictably, he refuses to believe her and after accusing her of being in a cult, he encourages her to join Christian America for the chance to locate her daughter. Although she rejects his offer, she does ask him to help her daughter if he ever

finds her. She then sets out to find the other members of her community who split up after their escape. Along the way she shares Earthseed verses with everyone she encounters so that she has gained many converts by the time she reaches Oregon. When Lauren meets her daughter at the end of the novel, Earthseed has become a thriving religion and has many followers and because her daughter has known her uncle for over ten years at this point in the narrative, she feels is resentful of her mother's commitment to Earthseed, but equally skeptical of Christian America as well. Before Lauren dies she is able to see the Earthseed destiny of taking root among the stars fulfilled as the first group of people leave to colonize the moon.

As is typical of the bildungsroman that the *Parable* series shares many characteristics with, the protagonist's journey is one from darkness to enlightenment or naiveté to experience. Indeed, Geta LeSeur reminds us that "the narrator's journey from the North to the South is an important stage in his initiation since it is a movement from the rural to the urban, and on a metaphorical level from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge" (10). Mathias Nilges' and Marlene Allen's description of Lauren's "Bildung" and "classic African American journey book" respectively underscore the utility of reading the text within this tradition. In spite of the main characters' maturity for their age, at the outset of their journey from L.A. the main characters are relatively innocent, but by the time they reach their destination, they are far worldlier than when they began. Lauren's movement typifies her maturation because at the outset when she and her ragged band of followers are traveling, they are not quite sure of their destination. However, spiritual maturation accompanies their trip such that by the end of both series,

when the main characters have literally moved from bondage to freedom, they have presumably been spiritually liberated as well.

Lauren's journey is enlightening for many reasons. Like slaves whose access to information is limited, the group views migration as a solution to their problems. Also like slaves, they find themselves with a very Harriet Tubman-esque figure as their leader, a "heroine [who] can save herself and others by constructing a 'modern underground railroad' [that] take[s] them north to liberating spaces" (Butler qtd. in Allen 1358). Lauren is also physically imposing and occasionally dresses like a man, furthering the Harriet Tubman symbolism and further emphasizing the importance of the spiritual guide possessing both male and female characteristics. After being chastised by Lauren, her friend Harry declares, "You damn sure talk macho enough to be a guy" (Butler *Sower* 182). Although Lauren is immediately worried that her guise will be discovered and that Harry's careless remark will jeopardize the safety of the group, she also realizes that she cannot merely dismiss him because "numbers mattered. Friendship mattered. [Most importantly,] one *real* male presence mattered" (Butler *Sower* 183). Such a reaction reveals the painful reality that as much as Lauren might have actually been in charge, in the midst of an extremely volatile society, Lauren and her company still must perform gender in order to survive. In a similar observation, Mathias Nilges observes, "Lauren's quest to found a new community poignantly begins with an act of cross-dressing, which initially serves the purpose of utilizing Lauren's rather masculine physical proportions as a deterrent for potential attackers" (1343). Nilges goes on to say that although Lauren divests herself of the male attire, she still fills the absentee father role in the narrative (1343). While this is debatable, the fact that Lauren serves as mentor to many people over

the course of the narratives certainly supports reading her as spiritual guide or in this case, figuratively a spiritual father.

There are certainly many compelling ways to read and think about Octavia Butler's novels. Indeed, the problem of genre is one that this study attempts to address because in many cases, as with most of Butler's novels, these categories are not mutually exclusive. In "'We Need the Stars' Change, Community, and the Absent Father in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents*," Nilges' argues that Butler's *Parable* series are not post modern, but rather, "post Fordist," artifacts. In short, he asserts that Butler's aphorism that the only constant is change serves as an intervention not because it provides a solution to the problem plaguing a post apocalyptic California society, but because it articulates a distinct reality facing the characters in the novel-that "first and foremost [change is] society's central problem" (Nilges 1335). However, in an effort to affirm Octavia Butler's critical intervention in other arenas, particularly regarding the importance of Butler's novels as post-Fordist "treatises," Nilges reduces other readings of Butler's novels by describing them as follows:

Verses from Lauren Olamina's *BOOK OF THE LIVING* are commonly considered evidence that supports readings of Butler's novels as arguments for the necessity to leave behind outdated conceptions of community and society, trading them in for the progressive ideal of change. Such readings of the *Parable* novels frequently refer to classic postmodern arguments regarding the liberatory [sic] potential contained in concepts such as diversity, pluralism, the incredulity toward repressive meta-narratives or the embrace of difference. (1333)

He goes on to provide what essentially becomes a Marxist analysis of the texts explaining that if Fordism refers to the impact Henry Ford's assembling process had on the auto industry and other aspects of modern life, post Fordism then can be understood as a shift

in people's personal and political life that was marred by "deregulated service and immaterial economies" (Nilges 1333). Such an observation would seemingly not be relevant to a discussion of the mentoring bonds in the series except that Nilges' argument hinges on the premise that "within [Lauren's] desire to restore the idealized protective father...lurks the potential to revive his shadowy double, the punitive father" (Nilges 1334). Such nostalgia, Nilges would argue, reflects a desire to return to a time before the extensive social and cultural regulation of capitalism (1335). Given that Butler invests a great deal of time in the first novel identifying the crippling affects of the new "debt slavery" caused by company's such as KSF, an analysis that takes economics and class into consideration has great merit. Most importantly, however, this focus of the estranged and, later, absent father Laurence, accentuates the many mentoring relationships within the novel.

One of the most ironic moments that reveals the significance of mentoring bonds occurs through Butler's nuanced critique of the slavery. Because there are numerous images of slavery within the *Parable* series it is difficult to determine precisely what type of slavery Butler is indicting. In fact, one critic observes that "in the novels' setting, Butler overlaps the past, present, and future [...such that] 'Robledo becomes a frightening metaphor of America in gridlock, a world that closely resembles the nineteenth century plantation that trapped Frederick Douglass and the twentieth-century ghetto that immobilized Bigger Thomas'" (Robert Butler qtd. in Allen 1356). Somewhat ironically, it is in the first novel that we see the crippling effects of economic slavery. In *Parable of the Sower* the reader experiences a future depicting the virtual slavery caused by large corporations who underpay their employees, thereby causing economic

dependence on them. Though Lauren and her father disagree on many things, they are both skeptical that the international company Kagimoto, Stamm, and Frampton (KSF) that her stepmother wants to go work for (Butler 122). In discussing this new breed of economic imprisonment in the novel Allen writes, “while on the surface, KSF’s offer sounds like a good deal, in reality the situation holds great dangers for those naïve enough to take up the company’s offer” (1357). Cory, Lauren’s stepmother, is just such an individual, but given the rampant violence, the political and social turmoil, and the scarcity of basic necessities, who can blame her for thinking that the “security” provided by KSF is preferable to an uneasy peace. Allen continues, explaining that because their current President has “suspended workers’ rights laws in favor of businesses, KSF will have free rein to treat its employees anyway it pleases” (1357). Again, although set in the near future, it seems fairly obvious that Butler is as much critiquing our own exploitative labor practices guised as ‘economic democracy’ and making a correlation between them and antebellum slavery moreso than she is making projections about how large scale corporations will operate in the future (Allen 1358). Marlene Allen’s claims center around the idea that once things happen to African Americans they soon start to happen to other minorities. Significantly, what both Marlene Allen and Mathias Nilges’ subtly reveal are the kernels of Laurence and Lauren’s relationship, which is one of the briefest, but most profound mentoring relationships in the novel. Laurence’s practicality and tutelage has helped Lauren recognize the crippling debt slavery caused by large corporations for what it is. More importantly, like her father before her, Lauren becomes the religious center of her community.

Despite its occasional post apocalyptic surrealism, the *Parable of the Sower* truly embodies the symbolism of its name in that it possesses a great deal of verisimilitude in regard to the gender dynamics within the church, especially the black church. Laurence's tendency to be very traditional in his thinking certainly exacerbate the issues between he and Lauren, and one critic even contends that a major cause of contention between the two is caused by "the law of the father" and the father's position as the symbolic head of the black church in Robledo (Nilges 1343). A more interesting reading of the novel might suggest that the title references Laurence rather than Lauren and like the biblical parable of the sower, some of the seeds Laurence sows by ministering to his children yield a great harvest. Accordingly, such an interpretation would suggest that his guidance, rather than their difference, caused Lauren to become the dynamic and charismatic leader of a major religion.

Butler complicates the major mentoring relationships in the novel through the Laurence/Lauren and Lauren/Marc binary. The tensions between Laurence and Lauren as "Gothic doppelgangers" foreshadow the problems between Lauren and her brother Marc in *Parable of the Talents*. Allen contends that because Laurence "is a relic of the past who's trapped in the stasis of the late twentieth century...he refuses to accede to Lauren's forewarning that the family should create survival packs in case of attack" (1360). For Allen and others, Earthseed appears to be Lauren's practical approach to the problems of the 21st century world she inhabits; it is also a way for Lauren to resist her father's "short-sightedness" (1360). For Nilges, Lauren's religious philosophy is merely an exercise in replacing one religious dogmatism for another. One notable instance of this occurs when Lauren sets her brother up for failure when he wants to preach. Although Marcus is made

aware of their community's rules regarding speaking at Earthseed Gatherings, he tells his sister that "[he] doesn't want to talk about Earthseed. I want to preach," Marc exclaims (Butler *Talents* 161). Lauren agrees, adding the caveat that he must respond to questions at the end to which Marc replies that he does not want to teach a course; he wants to give a sermon. For Marc, preaching and teaching are not synonymous so he can give a sermon that admonishes his listeners about the propriety of their actions or the salvation of their souls without being questioned (Bailey 24). Interestingly, "in these gatherings, Lauren does not speak to Marc herself and leaves the questioning to the rest of the community, illustrating [according to Nilges] once more the ways in which Earthseed has become a dogmatic structure, its laws internalized by its followers, operating independently from the father." He further asserts that Lauren's duplication of the "law of the father" may be acting "as Freud and Lacan famously suggest, even more strongly in the absence of the father" (Nilges 1346). Although Lauren's replication of hegemonic patriarchal practices may be unintentional, Nilges is careful to articulate that "possession of a penis is not a requirement for the re-creation of paternalistic structures" (1343). The possibility of the novel reflecting the "boomerang" of history or asserting a nostalgia for a recent past through a reclaiming of the father are not mutually exclusive as critics would have us believe. In fact, a compelling case can be made that Butler is doing a little both. Additionally, in symbolically possessing a penis, she invokes the duality of Legba, and for Lauren, this dualism is ultimately a strength.

Like Marc and her father, Lauren's community look to her for leadership and she offers them a philosophy she thinks will help them deal with their reality and thus she establishes the notion that 'God is Change' as the cornerstone of Earthseed belief. Since

such a philosophy suggests the inevitability of change, adherence to this belief system will ensure that believers are prepared for this change and can overcome it. In Lauren's mind, this view is necessary for the continuity of humanity in the dystopian and post-apocalyptic world in which they reside. Lauren and Marc's reasons for choosing their respective religious traditions probably do more to illuminate the difference between their two philosophies than anything else. Marc chooses his religion because it gives him a sense of power and offers a means of making Earth a better place to live. Even though Marc prefers the religion of his father as a way of understanding the world during a time of crisis, he takes a very different approach to religion than his father did. He recognizes the limitations of faith in their society: essentially faith has no benefit for the powerless. His view becomes evident when he acknowledges that though he always believed in God he believed in the ability of religion to influence masses even more. He states, "I think my father honestly believed that faith in God was enough. He lived as though he believed it. But it didn't save him" (*Talents* 338). These comments reveal Marc's simultaneous affirmation and rejection of his father's belief system.

Although Marcus Olamina genuinely believed that the church had the potential to change society, it would not be by way of ministries and the "emotional catharsis" it provided people, but only by the church's transition into politics. He notes that while these things are important and necessary, they are not power (Butler *Talents* 339). It is at this juncture when Marc truly embodies characteristics of both his historical and literary progenitors. He recognizes the personal benefit of going into the ministry while simultaneously seeing a need for the church to move from the spiritual realm to the physical by way of political activism, in essence to have some tangible application to

people's lives. However, when spiritual leaders began having increasingly prominent secular roles in society (i.e. during the Civil Rights movement), the view of women was still markedly different from that of men. Wallace Best describes this phenomenon aptly claiming, "the civil rights movement, while eliminating Jim Crow, probably increased the level of misogyny that black women public leaders faced...[because] although gender clearly shaped a number of key moments in the movement ... black women's leadership came to be viewed as 'behind the scenes,' 'grassroots,' 'local,' 'bridge,'-a whole assortment of labels that marked women's role as secondary to that of the men, who were regarded as leading the 'real action' (186). As with many of his literary predecessors, Marc's reasons for entering the ministry are not just his religious beliefs and desire to spread the Word. In fact, these reasons are tangential to Marc's desire for power and access that the pulpit supplies him (Bailey 27). Indeed the younger Olamina seems to embody many of these traits as he seems enamored with his own sense of self-importance.

Lauren Olamina's preference for Earthseed to her father's Baptist tradition is perhaps the most telling indication of her function as a spiritual guide. Like Legba, whose "power is derived from his strategic duality—his mastery of discourse and attendant recognition of its gross limitations" (Russell 9), Lauren's duality is her biggest asset. Not only does she possess personal characteristics of the masculine and feminine, but also Earthseed combines the best of both religion and science. Beyond potentially advocating space travel, Earthseed offers a profound idea-in the 21st Century neither science nor religion holds the possibility of salvation, but only a combination of both. In "Parable of a 21st century Religion," Kimberly Ruffin rightly suggests, "to stress the promise of

religious and scientific syncretism, Butler juxtaposes Lauren's amalgam of religious and scientific thought with depictions of Christian and biblically inspired characters as if to illustrate the perils of practicing religion without scientific insight" (91). Yet, the converse is also true. Butler implies that if people embrace a fusion of both religion and science instead of clinging irrationally to either belief system, usually religion, then the future may indeed hold more potential than the past (Bailey 49). Indeed, "as a doctrine [that] reflects its own basic tenet to 'embrace diversity,' ... [Earthseed] is a mixture of many different scientific theories and doctrines from diverse religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Judaism" (Allen 1363). As such, "Butler deconstructs traditional beliefs that religious faith and science are binary oppositions" (Allen 1363).

Butler interrogates the black Baptist preacher by recasting the charismatic preacher of the black preaching tradition as a woman. Such a reversal buttresses the problematic gender relationships within mainstream religious denominations. When DuBois suggests that music, frenzy, and the preacher are the defining features of black folk religion, "what DuBois actually identified was a creative tension among distinct but interlocking sets of actors and their voices" (Gilkes 6). In *If It Wasn't For the Women*, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes argues that whereas "music represented the collective expression, the community's voice, the shared work in what Robert Wuthnow calls the 'production' of the sacred, the preacher indicated the leadership that was generated and sustained by the community." Accordingly, Gilkes reads DuBois preachers "as a male elite that Angela Davis has gone so far as to label a caste" (Gilkes 6). Such an analysis reifies the points that Butler seems to make through Lauren Olamina. Historically, it has been fine for women to form the backbone of communities and churches, but it is quite

another thing to compete for power by asserting themselves in leadership roles. Butler not only rejects the patriarchy that dominates that tradition, but she also highlights the impracticality of this tradition. Ultimately, Butler recommends that blacks have a religion that they can take with them through their daily trials and that they have one that is not bound to a church or preacher and thus, the creation of Earthseed's simple articulations and profound philosophy (Bailey 22).

The running thread that ties all the other issues together in both novels is a paternalistic and patronizing attitude towards Lauren's leadership. Not only does Lauren's religious community have to be usurped because it exists outside of the boundaries of the established religious order, the unspoken problem with Acorn and that undergirds many of the major conflicts in the series (Lauren vs. Laurence, Acorn vs. President Jarrett, Lauren vs. Marc) is that Acorn is "a heathenish cult" that is "headed by a woman" and thus, the Crusaders feel they must be 'retaught' the old, Christian America ways" (Allen 1361). In addition to being a completely different religious philosophy, the "old ways" represent a completely different social structure, one that returns the man to the head of the household via patriarchy. In many traditional African religions women held extremely important social and religious functions because they served as "priestesses, queens, midwives, diviners, and herbalists" (Mbiti qtd. in Lincoln and Mimaya 276) and thus, Lauren's natural assumption of a leadership role is not grounded in her attempting to continue the Black Baptist preaching tradition set forth by her father. Lauren's religious identity and leadership is not defiant as Christian America seemed to suggest. Rather, it appears to be grounded in a different cosmology altogether. One that allows for the seamless integration of sacred and secular. Like Lauren, such a philosophy

embodies the duality necessary for Lauren to remain an effective leader in spite attempts to supplant her.

It is ironic that Octavia Butler's characters often have amazing vision and insights into the situations of everyone around them, yet possess a myopic view of their own situation. *Wild Seed's* Doro knows that because he has removed her from homeland and all that is familiar, Anyanwu needs him, yet he remains blissfully ignorant for most of the novel of how much he needs her. In a similar vein, Lauren Olamina of the *Parable* series can clearly see the problems with the Jarret administration's totalitarian and nostalgic impulse (Allen 1345), while being blissfully oblivious to her own agenda. One would think that "Lauren's insight into the problems associated with the return to a paternalistic social order seems to suggest that she should be able to avoid making the same mistakes" but Butler doesn't offer such easy solutions (Allen 1346). To do so would be to provide us with low hanging fruit. No, rather than paint President Jarrett's political regime as 'bad' and Earthseed as inherently 'good,' Butler forces us to rethink such reductive categories altogether. Through strategic doubling, coupling, mirroring, and reversals, Butler further complicates an already complex social tableau. Although there are certainly mitigating circumstances in each novel that make such concessions difficult, the consistent theme in these, and other novels in Butler's oeuvre, is that a gendered power struggle can undermine the efficacy of establishing and/or preserving strong mentoring bonds; however, Butler has always been careful to craft strong heroines who fuse multiple traits such that they can successfully navigate the gendered tightrope they walk while leading others in the process.

CONCLUSION

Often castigated for not having an overt political agenda, black women writers from Wheatley to Hurston to more recent writers such as Gayl Jones have often wrote themselves into being in the way that Kenneth Warren implies that African American literature was written into existence. In an attempt to assert their personhood and the beauty and complexities of their lives, these women utilize numerous genres, plot devices, storylines, themes, motifs, etc. to assert that black women are sensitive, angry, caring, industrious; that they fall in love, commit crimes, get married and have children, get divorced, and wait tables. Black women writers continue to explore black female subjectivity and their journey towards self-actualization. In short, many contemporary novels by black women reveal that our lives are just like everyone else's, completely normal. The characters' lives are not unlike our own in that their lives must be lived. Experienced. Felt.

Because some of these novels have lacked an overt political agenda, black women writers represent the position that many contemporary African American writers have arrived at—they do not have to choose between writing politically or writing beautifully; they can do both or debatably, neither. Even Toni Morrison, one of the greatest writers of the 20th century, black or otherwise, speaks to the necessity of not sacrificing politics on the alter of aesthetics and vice versa:

If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything...the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust. That's

a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it's tainted. My feeling is just the opposite: if it has none, it is tainted. The problem comes when you find harangue passing off as art. It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time. ("Rootedness" 345)

Here, she echoes W.E.B. DuBois almost a century prior who writes, "I do not care a damn for art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent" (22). By filtering narratives of race and class through the lens of gender, black women's writings reaffirm the importance and complexity of identity but they also reveal that in many instances, race is not the most salient aspect of a black writer's identity. In light of this, this dissertation has sought to illuminate other pertinent aspects of black writers, or more accurately their fictive counterparts, identity. Most notably, the project has explored the importance of community and mentoring relationships on the self-actualization of the characters.

The previous five chapters, to some degree, challenge Western empiricism or at the very least, insist that there is, and can be, more than one rational way of knowing. By asserting the primacy of the community, but not at the expense of the individual's development and maturation, the narratives considered here draw on a long-standing tradition within communities. Such instances might range from the types of relationships fostered in within residential communities and families to the transitory communities formed in academia. For instance, Yula Moses expands on that process of communal nurturing and mentoring that occurs within communities of black women explaining, "my

sister's daughter gave me a child, which she should have given a father! I trained that child in the ways she should live, and her mother thanked God and me upon her dying bed that she had lived to see her daughter being the kind of woman she wished she had been herself" (Gwaltney 181). What Mrs. Moses reveals is not only the way that women within a family or community will step up and assume parenting roles for children who are not their own, and even without any formal mentoring arrangement, she sets a precedent of leading by example, which younger women in turn emulate. Such practices form the basis for the mentoring relationships within communities of black professional women such as the types referenced in the Introduction. This idea of what mentoring looks like in contemporary black women's fiction and what inspires it was more of an end goal of the project rather than the guiding principle driving my analyses in the previous chapters.

This dissertation began as a reflection on the following question: What role does spirituality play in a time of crisis? More importantly, I was concerned with how it equipped people with the tools to deal with said crisis. Initially I was thinking of the way that religion comforted believers through concepts like faith and grace; however, I eventually came to the conclusion that a less formal concept, that of spirituality, could be used to help people in times of crises. The question then became, how do you equip people with the spiritual knowledge necessary to help them overcome these tragedies. Ideally, in much the same way that you prepare people to handle any other issues-you train them. As trite as such a response seemed, the notion that people should receive training or that, in fact, that literature, bears out the process of preparing individuals to deal with both personal and communal crises was one that was largely unnoticed or under

examined in African American literature. Scholars, critics, and even novelists themselves, alluded to this process, but they never officially named it or identified what its defining characteristics are. To my mind, identifying some of the features of this body of literature was much easier than articulating the research question itself. African American literature is rife with examples of crisis and trauma—from the mental, physical, and sexual transitions often explored in the bildungsroman to harsh tales of violence and exploitation to post apocalyptic narratives. In many of the tales involving such crises, there is often a spiritual leader or guide/healer who is charged with ensuring the well being and in some cases, the salvation of their communities. For all of the scholarship about this fairly ubiquitous figure, little is made of the novice that he or she grooms to take his or her place and the critical relationship between the two. In light of the dearth of scholarship about the relationship between this pair—the spiritual guide/healer and his or her protégé—this dissertation proposes a closer examination of this relationship as a unique type of apprenticeship narrative. Such a study is significant not only because it has the potential to expand our understanding of the black bildungsroman, but more generally, to increase our knowledge of all coming of age narratives. Whereas for African Americans, religion, specifically the social institution of the church, often encouraged or created political resistance, for Americans of European descent, the church and religion were frequently used to aid imperialism. Although religion and spirituality are not synonymous, a study of tales that focuses on religious training and preparation for the clergy (i.e. James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*), might also be enriched by examining them within the scope of the spiritual apprenticeship narrative.

More importantly, thinking about contemporary narratives by black women's writers in terms of genre is useful because while such identifying characteristics are useful in codifying features of popular texts, a study of genre allows the reader to critically interrogate texts that are not written by the same author or texts that are produced during different literary periods. Studying these texts in light of genre, and in this instance, creating a genre that attempts to offer a holistic approach to analyzing these texts, encourages previously under or unexplored works to receive comparable amounts of scholarly attention as canonical works, acknowledging that the concept of the canon is problematic in and of itself.

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