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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Ayoade Olulanu Joy Asekun, entitled "Making the Connection: African Cosmology in Toni Morrison's Beloved and Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts, with a major in English.

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Making the Connection: African Cosmology in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my other half, Jonathan Michael Oliver Scurlock, without whose encouragement and support I would still be contemplating academia.

It is also a "juba", praisesong, to my beloved ancestor, "grani" Eleanor Mabo.

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is not to claim it as the "right" way of reading the two texts analyzed, but rather to propose an alternative critical method. The introduction therefore looks to how Western academy privileges Eurocentric critical methods. It attempts to show how an African reading of Beloved and Praisesong for the Widow might allow for a different understanding of the novels.

Chapter One reads Toni Morrison's notions of good and evil as reflecting "African" conceptualisation of these ideas--not as binary opposites, but one where the two are accepted as necessary elements of the "African" cosmology. The chapter looks specifically at Morrison's representation of female characters as expressive of Yoruba thoughts. It further shows how the character Beloved exhibits characteristics of the Yoruba abiku spirit child and the female capability for distorting her creative powers.

Chapter Two reads Paule Marshall's Praisesong through West African belief systems, highlighting specific "African" beliefs present in the novel. It examines ancestor veneration and its legitimating roles in the lives of the living. It follows the protagonist's, Avey Johnson's, spiritual and physical journey towards an "African" ritual healing and examine Marshall's connecting of African,

Caribbean, and African American cultures as a means of healing for the fractured black psyche. Chapters One and Two both assess Morrison's and Marshall's "African" ways of knowing which inform their works.

The Conclusion appraises Morrison's and Marshall's application of their novels as "fixing methodologies" by giving active memory to those that died in the Middle Passage. The section concludes that because both writers are consciously connected to their black communities and heritage their works reflect "African/black" cultural ways of understanding.

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Preface

In any discussion of a text within "African" belief systems and philosophies, it is necessary to first clarify what one means by "African." One must resist the inadvertent trap of essentialism and over-generalisation about a continent whose traditional religions are closely tied to numerous and varied ethnic groups. "Hence it may be said that there are as many different 'religions' as there are ethnic language groups, which number over 700 south of the Sahara" (Ray 3).[1] To speak of an "African" belief system implies a monolith that ostensibly ignores the diversity and vastness of African religions, cultures, and traditions. As Benjamin Ray stipulates, "there are, however, many similarities among the religious ideas and practices of major cultural and linguistic areas...and certain fundamental features are common to almost all African religions" (3). My usage of "African" and "Africanist" are therefore governed by these commonalities; that is, I use "African" as an abstraction based on intersecting links found within West African cultures.

As this is a literary study rather than an anthropological one, my "Africanist" reading embraces the general literary notion of an "African" heritage, of African ways of knowing, which I believe are expressed in Morrison's and Marshall's works. My critical methodology strives not

only to illuminate the strength of Beloved and the importance of Praisesong for the Widow but also to realise the applicable usage of alternate and non-Eurocentric critical strategies.

It is surprising that with the significant work that has been done, and continues to be done, on African spirituality and philosophies as theoretical modes, the Western literary academy on the whole still resists the notion of employing African belief systems and philosophy as a critical method. I believe this resistance stems from a lack of understanding of African religions/cosmology, and a desire, conscious or unconscious, to maintain the privileged position of Eurocentric theoretical modes for analysing literary works.

In her thought-provoking book Black Women, Writing and Identity, Carole Boyce Davies addresses the academy's privileging of Eurocentric theory.

> Theory, as it is reified in the academy, still turns on Western phallocentric (master) or feminist "gynocentric" (mistress-master) philosophy.... Many of us [black feminists] feel that unless we enter the discussion in precisely the terms presented in Euro-American, male dominated academic contexts, our words will not be taken seriously.... The language of theory is loaded with references to European male theorists accompanied by a certain ponderousness and linguistic and syntactic

> convolutions. (39-40)

Whilst, like Davies and Barbara Christian in her essay "Fixing Methodologies," I do not reject theory altogether, I do believe in the usefulness of "other ways of knowing," especially when addressing black texts. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. points out, "whether we realize it or not, each of us brings to a text an implicit theory of literature, or even an unwitting hybrid of theories..." (Figures in Black xx). Because the adult mind is not a *tabula rasa*, as Frederic Jameson's "political unconscious" posits, one inevitably brings assumptions which determine interpretations of texts.

> The Political Unconscious accordingly turns on the dynamics of the act of interpretation and presupposes.... that we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations. (9)

If we accept Jameson's notion of the reader's presuppositions as those derived from the dictates of a "particular master code" of interpretative methodologies, we must also accept that cultural experience/assumptions too will unavoidably influence the act of interpretation of texts.

Accordingly, using the phrase Davies borrows from Zora Neal Hurston, I am willing, as one does with a visitor in

African or "African based" culture, "to go a piece of the way" with Eurocentric theories/theorists without following them "all the way home." To "go all the way," as Davies aptly points out, would position me far from my cultural experiences, ways of knowing, and particular master codes which influence my readings of black texts. Moreover, Davies' "visitor theory" allows for multiple interpretations.

> [It] offers a technique on interaction similar to the intention of 'multiple articulations.' It becomes a kind of *critical relationality* in which various theoretical positions are interrogated for their specific applicability to Black women's experiences and textualities.... (46)

Thus, my readings of Toni Morrison's Beloved and Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow will be shaped by the configurations of an Africanist perspective and certain applicable Eurocentric theories. Since I grew up within Yoruba and West African culture, because many of the Africans shipped to the New World were from the West African region, and because Toni Morrison's and particularly Paule Marshall's works reflect a cosmological viewpoint derived from West African sources, my critical perspective will inevitably be predetermined by these factors.

Although, as alluded to above, there exists no monolithic African belief system, there exist similarities within different traditional religions and philosophies.

These similarities include a belief in the interaction of the world of the living and the world of the spirits which encompasses the gods and the ancestors, the belief in witches (both male and female), reincarnation, and the importance of naming.

Similarities between African traditional religions and the African-influenced religions of the New World reflect the dynamism and tenacity of Africans and their belief systems.

> Religion was one of those especially tenacious traditions that enabled Africans to maintain their sanity and sense of control in a strange, hostile land. Instead of being forgotten and laid aside, deities and supernatural powers "were carried in the memories of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic. To be sure, they underwent a "sea change"... However, "much remained of...the vitality and durability of African religious perspective. And it should be emphasized that it is the *continuation of perspective* that is significant, more so than the fact that the cults of particular African gods...have been transmitted to the New World. (Italics mine. Walter F. Pitts 92).

In Praisesong for the Widow, Paule Marshall employs African-influenced religious practices in New World religions, as we see with the Carriacou Islanders and Tatem religiosity, in a manner that displays notions of African religious continuity in the New World. Similarly, in Beloved, Toni Morrison's

black characters' Christianity is arguably an African interpretation of the religion forced upon them. Notwithstanding that the ex-slaves are Christians they still display certain African religious perspectives. Morrison's ancestral figure Baby Suggs, although not an ordained preacher, nevertheless holds the role of the community spiritual leader. But her preaching is not a Christian one, where the spirit is privileged over the body. She encourages the ex-slaves to love their bodies, and by loving their corporeal bodies the slaves achieve a psychic unification of the two spheres. These "African" perspectives regard humans as consisting of "social, moral, spiritual, and physical components united together" (Ray 3). Moreover, Benjamin Ray's explication of the African belief "that social conflicts can make people physically ill and moral misdeeds can cause spiritual misfortunes" (5) can be seen in Paule Marshall's protagonist, Avey Johnson.

Whereas the religious aspect of cultural continuities appears acceptable, the "cultural" facet appears to be far more problematic. The arguments over cultural continuities are usually divided into two camps. The first follows the arguments of E. Franklin Frazier who, refuting ideas of African "survivals" in the New World, claims the harshness of slavery and the efforts of white masters overwhelmed the slaves, thus erasing their African consciousness. In the second camp are the followers of Melville Herskovits who

argue for and demonstrate "African Survivals" in their New World descendants.[2] Within the African survivalist camp, exists a disagreement between those that view African cultural continuations in the New World as "retention" and those that view them as "recreations."[3] Whilst I do not disagree with either survivalist arguments, what seems more important is that the concepts of religion and culture within African philosophical thought and belief system cannot be separated. That there exist similarities between New World religions and African traditional religions inevitably means that there also exists cultural recreations and or retentions.

Even when other religions such as Christianity replace or are syncretically mixed, with traditional African religions, a fundamental "African" philosophy and cultural perspectives persist. Because the African's belief system also informs everyday life, the secular and non-secular exist as one. The African, whether or not practising traditional religions, derives his or her cosmological perspective from traditional religious beliefs. The persistency of African traditional culture, I believe, can be seen in contemporary African and African diaspora culture, and this permeates into the literary works of writers such as Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, Toni Cade Bambara, Gloria Naylor, David Bradley, and Randall Kenan. Arguably, the intertextual elements within the works of all

these writers is the presence of the ancestor and ancestral veneration.

Ancestral or elder veneration or reverence is perhaps the most pervasive African retention in African American and Caribbean cultures. Joyce Pettis links the presence and role of the ancestor in black women's fiction to a West African heritage.

> They [ancestors] bridge history, melding present strategies with those of the past as they assume responsibility for instructing new generations in survival techniques. This cultural role is a part of the heritage of West Africa, where the elderly are revered. The ancestral presence, visible in nonfiction as well as fiction, is thus heavily valued as a factor in cultural continuity. Ancestors function as mentors, sustaining the moorings of fragile spirits. (117)

Female elders like Baby Suggs in Beloved and particularly great-aunt Cuney in Praisesong are by essence "African" ancestors. The reverence of elders is part of the cultural continuities-- "African ways of knowing"--which I believe inform, consciously (certainly in Marshall's case), and unconsciously (arguably in Morrison's case) both authors' works. This is not to say that Western Christian cultures do not respect their elders, but within African traditions, the active role of elders does not end in their deaths: they simply continue from the spirit world their role of guiding

their living relatives. As long as those still living pay homage to them and perform the appropriate rituals, ancestors are thought to act as their benevolent benefactors and spiritual guides. Neglecting the ancestors, as will be seen in Praisesong, effects physical and psychic disorders.

The perception of the cosmos in both Beloved and Praisesong also reflects a pervasive African belief. To take the example of the Yoruba of West Africa, they "conceive of the cosmos as consisting of two distinct yet inseparable realms--aye (the visible, tangible world of the living) and orun (the invisible spiritual realm of the ancestors, gods and spirits)" (Abiodun, Pemberton and Drewal 14). This cosmic view certainly informs both Morrison's and Marshall's fiction and is undoubtedly an aspect of African diaspora culture. This link between the two worlds can be seen in Beloved's interaction with Sethe's household both as a ghost and in a tangible form, and as seen in great-aunt Cuney's beyond-the-grave ancestral interaction with Avey.

Morrison's perception of morality is also conceived within West African terms. Consequently many limit their interpretation of characters such as Beloved and Sula, the title character and pariah figure of Morrison's second novel, because they insist on understanding these complex characters through Judeo-Christian notions of good and evil. Morrison's conception of good and evil in Beloved is essentially African. Abiodun, Drewal, and Pemberton affirm

that the "characterization of the orisa [gods] has nothing to do with issues of good and evil. All gods, like humans, possess both positive and negative values..." (15). Arguably this is a universal ideological concept. However, unlike Christian striving to emphasize "good" and suppress or eliminate evil, the African hermeneutics of good and evil is dialectical, as will be seen in Baby Suggs' feast in Beloved.

An "Africanist" reading allows for a clearer understanding of the ethereal qualities of both Beloved and Praisesong. I hope that by applying African belief systems as the critical methodology for interpreting Beloved and reading Praisesong, concepts of good and evil, the complexity of Beloved as a character, spirituality/ancestral veneration and rituals of healing will be evidenced as emerging from "African ways of knowing," or as being directly informed by African belief systems.

As Barbara Christian asserts, the time has come to resist "the pervasive belief within American cultural institutions that Africa does not have a philosophical tradition," and the "Western academic's denigration" (366) of African ancestral veneration and belief systems as irrelevant or mere superstition.

PART ONE

Binary Fusion: Good and Evil and the Figuring of the *Abiku* in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

I: Literary overview: An Assessment of Critical Essays on Beloved

The Africanist ideals evident in Beloved are not always apparent in the many analyses that Toni Morrison's fifth novel generates. Unlike Barbara Christian, most critics' interpretative methods seem grounded in Western thought. Valerie Smith's analysis illustrates the difficulty of reading Beloved and the reason that it elicits so many different interpretations. Smith's analysis of Beloved centres on the way in which slavery and slave narratives are rewritten in contemporary critical and fictional literature. She reflects on Morrison's use of "black bodies in the construction of narratives of slavery" (346). The characters in Beloved, she shows, are not only scarred physically but sensory stimulations also trigger their suppressed mental scarring by slavery. She further comments "that the characters feel suffering through their bodies [and] are healed, physically and psychically, through the body as well" (348). In this way, Smith concludes, that through Beloved Morrison aims to reclaim the suffering black body, but that the reader can only experience this suffering as a narrative and not as physical pain.

Smith also interprets Beloved as the embodiment of Sethe's murdered child and past, as well as the collective past of the slaves. According to Smith our ability to

comprehend Beloved, physically and linguistically, emphasizes the constant shifting of narrative and broad range of interpretations the novel sustains.

Pamela E. Barnett's and Trudier Harris's interpretations of Beloved as vampire and succubus figure are derived from European paradigms. Barnett's linking of the shape-shifting witches in African American folklore to European supernatural paradigms appears to ignore the fact that African American folklore tradition springs from African folklore reinterpreted by the African slaves in the New World. Although I agree with Barnett's reading of Beloved's manipulative method of draining Sethe's vitality, and her sexual interaction with Paul D as unscrupulously draining him of semen, I interpret these actions as typifying the destructive nature of West African shape-shifting witches. Barnett notes Beloved's lingering presence after she has been exorcised, but whilst her interpretation emerges from a Freudian theory of the persistency of trauma, mine will explicate Beloved's post-exorcism existence in terms of Yoruba belief system.

Notwithstanding the fact that Trudier Harris's reading of Beloved inspired Barnett's reading, and to an extent triggered my reading of Beloved as the abiku, our approaches and understanding of this novel are clearly different. Her suggestion that Morrison demonises women stems from viewing Beloved through Western Judeo-Christian moral standards.

Although, in agreement with her recognition of Beloved's female energy (what I read as the Yoruba ase) and the destructive nature of this energy, I view Beloved's nature as expressive of the Yoruba female duality. Harris also questions the gathering together of the community of women in order to exorcise Beloved, suggesting that it takes a "community of effort" to eliminate her evil presence from within their midst. Comparatively, I read the community of women as a powerful healing force that effects cosmic balance. The exorcism that Harris refers to as "pagan," I read as traditional African religious practices. Like most critics, Harris reads Sethe's killing of Beloved as challenging the accepted notion of morality as absolutes of good and evil, but she does not explore a potential ideology that informs Morrison's alternative morality.

Similarly Patrick Bjork's reading of the ethereal qualities in Beloved emerge from a Western perspective. He describes the supernatural elements in Beloved as "a fusion of the 'Novel' and the 'Romance'" (151) using Nathaniel Hawthorne's preface to *House of Seven Gables* to explain this fusion. He also asserts that to "embrace this story we must embrace its narrative dreaminess not as a means to stability and wholeness...(147). Clearly Bjork's reading differs from an Africanist reading of the novel as a fixing methodology, a way to wholeness, and an expression of African supernatural beliefs.

Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin similarly address the issue of the supernatural in Morrison's works. They regard Morrison's use of ghosts as differing from Western literary conventions, where ghosts come to traumatize the living who view them as intrusive. Morrison's ghosts, they explain, come for a purpose, and in Beloved's case she returns in flesh to bring the past to the present and force the living to grapple with this past. Harding and Martin further note that the conflict between the individual and the community has been a prevalent element within American literature. But, whereas a character like Huck Finn moves away from a community in conflict with his ideas, in Morrison's novels "the individual's only chance of survival lies within the community" (89). Understanding Morrisonian notions of collectivity, Harding and Martin perceive the collective female exorcism of Beloved as a communal reclamation of Sethe back into the community, though I believe they overlook the spirituality within this healing ritual.

Because Harding and Martin recognise that Morrison's works do not operate on the "dichotomous Western tradition" (27), their interpretation of Baby Suggs' feast focuses on the inappropriateness of its "sumptuousness." Rather than regarding the community within notions of good and bad, they show that the feast "distinguishes her family from the rest of the community [and] disrupts group solidarity" (94).

Ann-Janine Morey's analysis of Beloved too recognises that female writers like Morrison have a counter Judeo-Christian cosmological world view. She, therefore, reads Beloved as incorporating accents of Hindu mythology and the defiance of slave religion, but she misses the African philosophy evident in Morrison's alternative cosmology.

Denise Heinze, like Harding and Martin, recognises that Morrison transcends the Christian dichotomy of good and evil, but further stipulates that Morrison works them with notions of dualism without resolving the dualism. An Africanist reading, however, accepts the unity of good and evil as characteristic of life--it needs no resolution, just an acceptable balance of the two.

Heinze, like most, grounds her analysis of Beloved in Western critical methodologies. She attempts to understand "fantasy" in Beloved through Kathryn Humes' discussion on fantasy and mimesis. She concludes that the supernatural element in Morrison's work is not an attempt to "foreground the supernatural as a unique expression of the black community, but as a way of signifying the difference between culturally imposed ways of seeing" (159). Whilst I do not completely disagree with Heinze's suggestion, I do, however, believe that the supernatural elements in Morrison's work signify a black/Africanist cultural way of knowing. Heinze's perspective is clearly Eurocentric; she understands Morrison's use of the supernatural within ideas of the

credible and the fantastic. An Africanist perspective does not struggle with the idea of an interaction between the spirit and living realms because it simply accepts it as a cosmological given.

Heinze's definition of Beloved as "part ghost, zombie, devil" (175) clearly shows the distortion that a Western perspective of this complex character produces. Although Heinze's Freudian analysis of Sethe's and Beloved's relationship is insightful--Beloved also exists as Sethe's double, and Beloved's punishment is really a manifestation of Sethe's guilt-- an Africanist reading arguably better discerns the nuances of this character.

Like most readings of Beloved, Doreatha Mbalia's analysis-- although addressing African collectivism--is derived from Western political ideological discourse. She embraces Morrison's works as "solidarity as solution" for "African" peoples, including the African diaspora in her view of African. As such, she recognises Baby Suggs' feast as tantamount to heresy, a "God-like action--[an] attempt to do alone what should be done together...(90). She interprets Beloved as symbolically representing black isolation and division which need to be destroyed for unity to be achieved. While Mbalia pertinently speaks of African collectivism, her analysis of Beloved ignores the supernatural elements of this character and the African spirituality which permeates the novel.

Philip Page, like Harding, Martin, and Mbalia, understands Morrison's ideals of black collectivity, individualism, and community. Consequently, he reads the tension between Sethe and her community as expressive of the double-edged nature of the community which can be nurturing but also constraining for the individual. Notwithstanding that he considers Beloved's rebirth, he does so only as thematic occurrence in the novel, side-stepping the supernatural aspect of her return. Obviously aware of Barbara Christian's idea of Beloved as a text for ancestral worship, he briefly makes mention of this but decides it is an insignificant issue.

While like Trudier Harris, Jan Furman interprets Beloved within a Western concept of the supernatural--as succubus--she nevertheless interprets the community of women's exorcism of Beloved as an unquestionable positive collective action. As with most critics that understand Morrison's ideals of community, she reads the community's betrayal of Baby Suggs' as not fulfilling their obligation to the individual.

Clenora Hudson-Weems' psychoanalytical approach to understanding Beloved's infantile cathexis to her mother Sethe, like Heinze's, is insightful as well as helpful to my reading of the character Beloved. Hudson-Weems plays on the "great mother" archetype theory, and through this, reveals Sethe's dual role of the nurturing mother and the "terrible

mother" (105). Her psychoanalytical method also sheds light on how slavery complicates the taboo of killing one's child. Although Hudson-Weems does not connect the community of women in Beloved to the African female principle, her language echoes African traditional religious values: "without the cultural codes of her womanhood, Sethe is not able to read significant signs of her community... There were no ritual priestesses to guide her through her rite of womanhood" (113).

Albeit that Susan Bowers, nor Barbara Hill Rigney focuses her analyses of Beloved specifically on African belief systems, both analyses more than any other parallels this Africanist one. Bowers explains how Morrison fuses "Christian notions of apocalypse with West African beliefs to create a revised apocalyptic that principally looks backward, not forward in time" (210). Bowers undoubtedly grasps the significance of the West African philosophy and perspective that informs Beloved.

> Working from the foundations of West African philosophy, at the heart of which is communication with ancestors..., Morrison presents an apocalyptic demolition of the boundaries between earth and the spirit realms, an invasion of the world of the living by the world beyond the veil. Within this West African philosophy is also a notion of cyclical time which differs from Judeo-Christian tradition, where time is conceived of as linear irreversible... (212)

Both Bowers and Barbara Rigney aptly read Baby Suggs as the "ancestor figure, the guide through a history that transcends recorded fact...the remnant of Africa, the keeper of racial memory...often the practitioner of voodoo; and she is also the embodiment of a female principle, a way of knowing that transcends the ontological" (Rigney 67). Barbara Rigney understands the significance of African motherhood and Morrison's realisation of the African female principle and its potential to create and to destroy. Although Rigney links Beloved's rebirth to Sethe's mother-love, she does not fully realise this rebirth within the West African concept of the abiku child.

Rigney and Bowers likewise read Beloved's rememory in terms of a collective consciousness/psychic racial memory. The ability of these two critics to understand the essentials of Morrison's characters, and other significant aspects of Beloved comes from the fact that they connect them to an African heritage.

II: Good, Evil, and the Abiku

Philosophical and religious debates over the questions of good and evil are both ageless and endless. The conceptualisation and interpretation of evil varies within different cultures, races, and religions. Anthony Mercatante shows that "the conflicting binaries" of good and evil exist within monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but not within the polytheistic religions of India and Persia. Polytheistic religions allow for a binary fusion of good and evil within the gods, humans, and nature, thereby prohibiting absolute perceptions of good and evil as right and wrong. "Polytheism has the option of dividing Good and Evil between different deities, though it can ascribe Good and Evil to one deity....when it divides the qualities a dualism arises...." (9). Clovis E. Semmens' explanation of metaphysical dualism facilitates a better understanding of the philosophy of the unity of opposites.

> Metaphysical dualism is the tradition of dichotomizing essential qualities found in nature and in human interaction and embracing one or the other as reality or as universally dominant. In this sense, everything is posed as opposites that are essentially antagonistic. An alternative would be to understand these qualities not as conflicting opposites but as distinctively different but necessary manifestations

> of an interconnected reality. Indeed we may find that a seemingly opposite quality is necessary in order to preserve the whole...(20-21)

The Judeo-Christian conceptualisation of good and evil can therefore be viewed as dichotomizing the two qualities as antagonistic opposites, where African traditional religious philosophy unites the two qualities as necessary aspects of the gods, humans, and nature. Such a unity of opposites can be seen for example among the Kongo people of lower Zaire, where good and evil are considered not as right and wrong, but where

> evil tendencies are considered an inescapable part of human nature, not something that can be completely eradicated. Such tendencies can only be integrated into the community and kept under control.... Since everyone has both a good and bad side, the goal is to keep the bad side under control, not to let it become worse than it need be. The community in order to prosper must be in harmony with its own evil side ....(Bockie 46-47)

Similarly within West African Yoruba traditional religion, Esu, an important deity, is seen as both negative and positive. In his traditional role as a benevolent and a malevolent force, he can be compared to the Yoruba female principle, which is believed to possess a fused binarism--the positive procreative <u>ase</u> (life force) and the negative forces of the <u>aje</u> (witches). <u>Ase</u> is an important and

integral aspect of traditional Yoruba belief system. Within Yoruba cosmology every object, animate and inanimate, is believed to possess ase:

> Existence, according to Yoruba thought, is dependent upon it; it is the power to make things happen and change. In addition to its sacred characteristics, ase also has important social ramifications, reflected in its translation 'power, authority, command....' Theoretically, every individual possesses a unique blend of performative power and knowledge--and the potential for certain achievements.... The recognition of the uniqueness and autonomy of the ase of persons and gods is what structures society and its relationship with the other world. (Abiodun 16)

Ase facilitates creativity, and as women are the vessels of procreation, their powers are thought to be potent and can be distorted for evil ends. These Africanist female characteristics can also be seen in Toni Morrison's works.

As Denise Heinze, Clenora Hudson-Weems, Barbara Christian, Doreatha Drummond Mbalia, and others have asserted, Toni Morrison fuses good and evil in a manner that prevents the reader from making absolute moral judgements about characters and events in her novels. Christian extends this assertion by rightly suggesting the need for an alternate, non-Eurocentric reading of Beloved. Contemporary literary criticism is so engrossed in Western theoretical

parley that one cannot help but appreciate her concerns about current interpretations of Beloved.

> I am perturbed by the attention, by the kind of critical attention Beloved has tended to receive, or to put it in our current literary language, by the critical discourses that are beginning to appropriate this complex novel. I am not worried that Beloved will be destroyed by discourses, for given the novel's text, it is often illuminated by them. Rather, I am concerned that another critical approach, which I assumed would have resulted in significant analyses, has not been applied to Beloved. (363)

Christian's African diasporic experiences growing up in the West Indies, and her inclination to look beyond Eurocentric academic discourse ostensibly drive her call for an alternative interpretation of this text. She postulates a definitive reading for Beloved--one based on African cosmology.

> The perspective I am proposing is one that acknowledges the existence of an African cosmology ....and explores its appropriateness for texts that are clearly derived from it. Since Beloved, as a sign of continually developing African cosmology, is as much about the period when Africans were forcibly displaced from their Motherland as it is about slavery in North America, it would seem logical for critics to consider how African belief systems might illuminate this text. (Christian 365)

As Barbara Christian suggests, my reading of Beloved is from an African perspective. Perhaps, as John Mbiti explains, my African reading of Beloved is an inevitable one.[1]

> Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields ....; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend the funeral ceremony.... Although many African languages do not have a word for religion as such, it nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his birth to long after his physical death. (2)

I am, it would seem, predisposed to an Africanist reading, irrespective of my background in Western society and culture. An Africanist critique will not only evidence an African cosmology and philosophy at work in Morrison's novel, but it will also elucidate the dialectic of good and evil in non-Western yet African American thought. My analysis shows how Morrison, as a writer of the African Diaspora, first and foremost uses an African polytheistic cosmological viewpoint, and secondly how she represents her women as expressions of Yoruba female attributes. It demonstrates how Morrison's fusions of good and evil force the reader to re-examine their Western Judeo-Christian moral presuppositions.

Morrison's black freed-slave community in Beloved has the essence of an African village; it is communal rather than individualistic. It is an African community where, as John Mbiti explains, "to be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community" (2). It is a village where evil, like good, necessarily exits to achieve cosmic balance. Hence Beloved and her mother Sethe are integral parts of their community. Respectively as witch and pariah, they serve as a form of check and balance in the community. Their individualistic desire is what renders them disconnected; for "only in community can individuals achieve total fulfilment or atone for momentary deviance" (Harding 111).

The first aspect of Beloved that expresses an African dual personality, that is the fusion of good and evil within a single entity, is Morrison's portrayal of 124 Bluestone Road. Her personification of "124" is reflective of an African cosmos, where everything animate and inanimate has its own ase, essence and personality. "One Hundred and Twenty Four" has what within Yoruba cosmology would be a dual personality of good and evil. With a defined personality 124 parallels the Yoruba deity, Esu. This important deity, within the Yoruba pantheon, best expresses Yoruba belief in the duality of life; Esu is both good and evil. Humans cannot make sacrifices to other deities

without an acknowledging sacrifice to Esu, and any failure to do so results in misfortune. He connects humans to the highest god by either clearing the pathway for their benefit or putting obstacles in it. Esu's complex personality, like 124 Bluestone Road, can be easily misinterpreted, as Thomas E. Lawson points out:

> Esu is one of the most complex of the Yoruba deities. Christian missionaries, in their early encounters with Yoruba religion, tended to equate him with the concept of the Devil, but this is most unfortunate and distorts his nature, because though he has certain evil properties, he is by no means the incarnation of evil.... It is precisely because Esu contains within himself forces both of good and evil, both reverence and irreverence, and encourages both worship and giving offense, that he is able to mediate between heaven and earth.... Esu, then, is the ambiguous god. (60-1)

Like Esu, 124 Bluestone Road exudes a duality that renders it both haven and hell for its inhabitants. The events that unfold within it correctly express this duality. Bluestone Road for Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law and the novel's ancestral figure, is initially a haven from slavery. But it deteriorates into a dwelling in which she becomes disillusioned with life, having failed in her role as the ancestral communal healer. For Sethe, 124 Bluestone Road becomes her shelter from the horrors of slavery and the site

of her first nurturing black community where her scarred body is bathed and healed, baptised and made whole. But it quickly dissolves into a hell. It is the place where she kills her just-crawling-baby daughter and consequently becomes first tortured by her guilt and then by the ghost of the dead daughter Beloved. For the community it represents its gathering spot--its locus for performing communal rituals and ceremonies that encourage feelings of wholeness. Soon, however, 124 Bluestone Road exudes arrogance and pride and turns into an anathema to be avoided, and Like Esu, it exhibits dialectical ambiguities similar to Yoruba cosmological viewpoint.

Whilst 124 Bluestone Road epitomises ambiguity, Sethe's household in Beloved embodies potent African female power and the capability for the distortion of this power. The women in Beloved reflect the female potential to be both nurturing and smothering. Baby Suggs, like many other African American female writers' ancestral figure--Paule Marshall's aunty Cuney in Praisesong, and Gloria Naylor's title character Mama Day to name a few--is the pivotal ancestral figure in Beloved. As an old woman she personifies African female power; thus, the reverence the community pays her is appropriate. Her influence on the community is positive; she encourages an African communal way of life, as well as the self-love the ex-slaves need to combat the evil of an oppressive white world. Like many of

Morrison's ancestral females, Baby Suggs is prone to excessive behaviour.[2] She turns a modest celebration into a lavish feast. "Baby Suggs' three (maybe four) pies grew to ten (maybe twelve). Sethe's two hens became five turkeys. The one bucket of ice brought all the way from Cincinnati ....became a wagonload of ice cakes for a wash tub full of strawberry shrug" (Beloved 137). She commits an African faux pas with her conspicuous consumption in a needy community, offending those she sought to please.

> It made them furious. They swallowed baking soda, the morning after, to calm the stomach violence caused by the bounty, the reckless generosity on display at 124. Whispered to each other in the yards about fat rats, doom and uncalled-for pride. The scent of their disapproval lay heavy in the air. (Beloved 137)

Morrison forces the reader to question her Western perception of acts of goodness by rendering Baby Suggs' feast within an African dialectical perspective. Acts of goodness, like acts of evil, must be kept in check in order not to overstep the realms of social balance. According to Yoruba culture a communal celebratory feast when given in moderation appeases the community but when excessive becomes a negative sacrifice that can cause communal envy against the individual, as well as evoking the wrath of the gods. Even Baby Suggs knows that the community was "angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them

by excess" (Beloved 137). The consequence of her "good" feast is communal fragmentation, rather than unity as would be expected. Her unintentional, thoughtless transgression against the community catalyses cosmic imbalance. The community goes against African collectivism and refuses to fulfill its obligation to the individual. Heavy with envy and spite, the freed-slaves, knowing the white slavers meant her harm, refuse to warn Baby Suggs of the evil riding towards her home. These social transgressions and communal breeches precipitate Sethe's killing of Beloved and the consequent alienation of her family from the Ohio freed-slave neighbourhood.

Nevertheless, Morrison obstructs our judgement of Sethe's killing of Beloved. Our awareness of the violation of her body, the "taking [of] Sethe's milk" at Sweet Home, and the trauma the experience of slavery has had on her psyche impede our moral censuring of her action. We understand why Sethe refuses to allow her children to experience slavery as she had. We empathise with her desire to protect and collect "all parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them.... Outside this place, where they would be safe" (Beloved 163). The white masters, as Barbara Rigney aptly states, "have violate[d] the sacred state of motherhood and the African spiritual values which, for Morrison, that state

represents" (68). Such a violation of African motherhood results in the distortion of female power; therefore, Sethe's infanticide expresses her ase, African female power for creation as well as destruction. Slavery has denied her the familial ties and a communal nexus to the older women who must initiate her rites of passage into womanhood. Sethe, therefore, has not learnt how to restrain her female powers, to balance the evil as well as the good within herself. She is guilty of setting herself up as a god with the right to create as well as to destroy her creation. Her one-woman defiant effort to protect her children turns her into a pariah. Her self-sufficiency and refusal to seek communal succour turns 124 into a solitary place. Without any interaction with and dislocation from the Cincinnati female community, Bluestone road inhabitants become fragmented.

As Baby Suggs seemed the quintessential African mother, so is the title character, Beloved, the paradigm of the female personality. Beloved is perhaps the most complex of Morrison's characters. As Barbara Christian points out, there are many psychoanalytical explanations and analyses that have attempted to come to terms with Beloved: she has been described as her mother's, Sethe's, ego, the manifestation of Sethe's guilt, a side of her that she [Sethe] must confront in order to be whole again. Whether we accept Beloved as real or as a psychological

manifestation of Sethe's guilt, we cannot ignore her demonic side. Her other-worldliness carries many supernatural implications/interpretations. She has been described by Trudier Harris and Pamela Barnett as succubus, vampire and spirit-child. As succubus, "she is a female demon and nightmare figure that sexually assaults male sleepers and drains them of semen," as Beloved does with Paul D. (Barnett 418). As vampiric figure, she slowly drains Sethe of vitality, figuratively sapping her life's blood.

Beloved's invasion of Sethe's untempered female household seems inevitable. Her return is also indicative of African cosmological motherhood, for "within the African view of nature, 'nothing is dead, no voice is still. An essential continuity is preserved between earth-mother and child" (Rigney 71). Sethe's acceptance of Beloved's ghost is that of the African's interpretation of death, not as an end, but as a "continuum" where the spirit of the dead child has acknowledgment in the physical world. Beloved's ghost is accordingly not a transgressive metaphysical intrusion but a welcomed physical presence in Sethe's and her daughter Denver's lives.

Consistent with Yoruba cosmology, Beloved parallels the abiku child who, failing to manifest herself again in a physical form, chooses an alternative route back to the physical world. In Yoruba culture the abiku is the child that dies as an infant and returns continually to the

mother's womb to be born again, only to die once more. The child struggles between the desire to return to the mortal world and the spirit world of other abiku companions. The abiku child returns to earth usually because of mother-love; it is drawn by the deep evocative desire of its mother. Although she died by her mother's hand, Beloved, like an abiku, is drawn back to this world by her mother's love. The circumstances of her death force her to find an alternative route to earth; she returns not physically reborn as the abiku would but through a metaphorical rebirth. Her return is analogous to a real birth, for as Beloved appears from the river by 124 Bluestone Road, Sethe experiences a pre-labour water breaking sensation:

> And for some reason she could not immediately account for, the moment she got close to see the face, Sethe's bladder filled to capacity.... She never made the outhouse. Right in front of its door she had to lift her skirts, and the water she voided was endless.... But there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb, and there was no stopping now. (Beloved 51)

Whereas Beloved physically appears a mature young woman, she has infant-like attributes; she displays the newborn's easy fatigue, has baby hair, dribbles saliva, craves sweets, and needs constant nurturing. Her emergence from water is significant--in addition to water as the origin of life--water also has strong symbolic links with the female

principle, and most female deities such as Oshun and Yemoja are connected to water:

> In Oshun rites, these [female] attributes are symbolised by the fan and by water. This is a soothing, disarming and softening kind of power ....which is capable of normalising, negating, or rendering impotent any other power, life, or substance. (Abiodun 13)

As a female child, Beloved contains within her African female power. But since she died as a child she has not the maturity and knowledge to keep in check her powers, hence the manifestation of them in a distorted form. While in appearance a mature woman, she is psychologically infantile, as Clenora Hudson-Weems' Freudian explanation demonstrates:

> With the murder, Beloved never has the opportunity to come into her own, to find a central self by moving beyond the stage of her infantile ego, which at the point of her death had already been damaged. Still mired in the world of her primary identification--her mother--Beloved does not differentiate herself from Sethe when she re-emerges eighteen years after her death; her world is merged with Sethe's. (104)

Like a typical abiku child, "it was Beloved who made demands. Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire" (Beloved 240). Beloved is the classic abiku child with her never-ending wishes and persistent need for maternal attention.

Characteristically for an abiku child, she knows without a doubt that her desires will be satisfied; for the mother of an abiku will fulfill all demands in order that her child chooses to remain in this world. Beloved's whims, in turn, become increasingly evil; her whims gradually suck Sethe dry of energy. As the spirit child who has experienced many lives, she has in terms of a collective consciousness, the memory of many past lives and consequently can perform her own special "rememory," and give active consciousness to the unspeakable horrors of the Transatlantic slave trade. Beloved's collective consciousness--an inherited psychic knowledge--can be understood through Jung's theory on "racial memory."[3] This implies that "just as certain instincts are inherited by the lower animals (for example, the instinct of the baby chick to run from a hawk's shadow), so more complex psychic predispositions (that is, a 'racial memory') are inherited by human beings" (Guerin 176). Psychologically burdened with the racial memory of the horrors of the Middle Passage and her association with the past and present, her evil becomes more complex.

> With slavery as her central trope for the human condition--it [slavery] represents a universe in which the value of humanity is nonexistent ....the question of being is amplified by Morrison. But so, too, are the problems of freedom, ethics, and morality in such a world. (Hudson-Weems 110)

Within the context of slavery it becomes even more difficult to make definitive moral judgements of right and wrong.

Unrestrained, Beloved evolves beyond the problematic abiku child; she distorts her female powers like the aje (witch) of the Yoruba world. Like her mother Sethe, Beloved has been denied the familial ties of "African" mothers who help a young girl grow into womanhood, hence her evolution into a destabilising force in Sethe's household. Her consumption of Sethe's energy and will to live has been described as vampiric, but also typifies the African witch-like process of consuming the victim. One of the common fundamental features of many African traditional religions is the belief in witches. With the Kongo people of West Africa, "there is the belief that ndoki [witch] destroys his victims by eating them; he invisibly attracts their psyche, their inner source of life and vitality" (Bockie 47). As witch, Beloved psychically feeds on Sethe's guilt, draining her of the will to live, and as Sethe physically deflates Beloved inflates. As her evil expands beyond the boundaries of acceptability, it must be checked so that it does not dominate the social order.

Beloved's duality of good and evil can also be explained through her connection to water. As cited earlier, within the Yoruba cosmos women are symbolically connected to water, and one of the most important female deities within the Yoruba pantheon of gods is Yemoja--a

fertility river goddess who also is capable of becoming the consuming witch (Apter 113). Beloved, like Yemoja, emerges from water and when upset puts her destructive personality to frightening extremes. Her cool mesmerising sexuality and its implementation in the seduction of Paul D. also embraces Yemoja's "female power [that] 'cools' and 'softens' men" (Apter 114). Despite her position as an evil within the community, Beloved's return is therapeutic. She effects a unifying influence; the Cincinnati community that had decided to distance itself from 124 and its arrogance and pride comes to Sethe's aid. Her presence allows Denver to grow into womanhood with the assistance of her African mothers. Denver develops into the woman that her mother could not be, eliciting communal help in a way her mother would not. Her presence also facilitates Sethe's reinstatement into the community by the women, for "without their sanction no healing can take place" (Abiodun 7). These women are by essence African; they know that to attain cosmic balance, evil can not be allowed to dominate:

> [N]obody needed a grown-up evil sitting at the table with a grudge. As long as the ghost showed out from its ghostly place--shaking stuff, crying, smashing and such--Ella respected it. But if it took flesh and came in her world, well, the shoe was on the other foot. She didn't mind a little communication with the two worlds, but this was an invasion. (Beloved 257)

The community of women have retained their awareness of African collectivism, and eventually fulfill their communal obligation to the individual. They band together to exorcise the evil Beloved, and so save Sethe's household. Beloved has no strength against the collective power of the older women, and must make do with roaming the village in her ghostly form without haunting 124 again. Yet, her presence is still felt, for "since witchcraft, like fertility is latent if not active, at different times in a woman's life, it can never be fully eliminated or destroyed" (Apter 112). For Sethe, unlike Denver, rehabilitation into the community is uneasy. Her female power has been unrestrained for so long that "by trying to destroy the monster that had deprived her and her family of their humanity, [she] had herself become one" (Hudson-Weems 111). She instinctively attacks her white landlord believing he is another white slave-trapper come to take her "best thing." Within an Africanist perspective, Sethe's female powers and personality have been unbalanced by slavery. She must now learn to balance her dual personality, and learn "the cultural codes of her womanhood" that postulates that though her role as a mother is significant, she must retain a self-love that produces psychic wholeness.

Morrison deals with the concepts of good and evil not as binary opposites but rather as dialectics, fusing these binaries to achieve an ambiguous African notion of morality.

Her narratives interrogate Western notions of good and evil as unequivocal absolutes of right and wrong where humans must strive to suppress the evil side of their personalities. Her black communities embrace an African philosophy of life. Sethe's struggle against her community truly reflects the African tension between the individual and the community, and as Morrison herself explains, "community is both a support system and a hammer at the same time. The collectivity both fosters and restricts its members, for survival depends on one's conformity to group values as well as individual development" (Harding 90). Morrison has not only instinctively inherited an understanding of African collectivity but is also aware of the dilemmas that come with it. Her attainment of this African ideology can be viewed as something arrived at through indirect pre-knowledge--a form of collective consciousness. Clearly she inherently understands African female ways of knowing. Once Beloved is figured as the abiku and as an expression of the Yoruba female personality, it becomes easier to understand women in Beloved as expressions of Yoruba good and evil, and the importance of their role in setting stabilising communal boundaries.

Morrison's women are characteristically powerful but oftentimes dangerous African women.[4] Their ase also bestows the power for destruction. They, more than men, must keep their powers in check, must strive to attain a harmonious

balance of their good and evil facets. Women, when in tune with their powers and rightly performing their roles as protectors of their gender and stabilisers of their community, are a formidable force:

> The voices of the women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (Beloved 261)

Morrison's imagery here clearly reflects the symbolic connection of water and the healing powers of African women and female deities. The community of women remember their obligations and perform the rites of atonement for Sethe.

To read Beloved within the Western frame of good and evil, of individualism over collectivism, ostensibly leads to a misinterpretation of Morrison's characters and events. To understand the raison d'etre of her characters and events is to view them from a black/ Africanist cosmic framework. A failure to understand the role of good and evil within an African cosmos is a failure to understand the lineaments of Morrison's world in Beloved. Good and evil are both necessary and inescapable facets of the West African cosmos; they express the Yoruba belief in the unity of opposites within humans and nature.

PART TWO

Ancestral Route to African Roots as a means of Healing in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow.

I: Literary Overview: An Assessment of Critical Essays on Praisesong for the Widow.

Nearly all readings of Praisesong for the Widow acknowledge the African cultural patterns and ancestral presence in the novel. These analyses, to varying degrees, discuss Paule Marshall's use of traditional African belief systems, but none specifically employ African philosophy/belief systems as the critical method through which to read Marshall's work and African American and Caribbean characters.

Keith Sandiford, for example, reads Praisesong through West African mythology; consequently he interprets Avatara's naming and great-aunt Cuney's pre-birth announcement in terms of African belief in re-incarnation and traditional African naming practice. I should note, however, that it was Joyce Pettis' intimation of the Oxford English Dictionary definition of *Avatara* that motivated my Ibo reading of the name. Sandiford, however, focuses his analysis more on Western psychoanalysis, as he says, for those sceptics who will not accept Marshall's use of "African cosmological rules to the affairs of a thoroughly Westernised character" (376). Consequently he correlates Lebert Joseph to Aunt Cuney as Avey's psychological guide, and does not, as most do, read him as representing the Yoruba deity Legba.

Like Sandiford, Missy Dehn Kubitschek's analysis makes

use of Western academic theory. She employs Joseph Campbell's classical quest theory to read Marshall's protagonist's journey, which as Kubitschek illustrates, adheres to Campbell's theory in that Marshall makes use of culturally specific myths. Her analysis, however, fails to explore the African ritual, dance, and song in Praisesong that most critics appropriately address.

Unlike Kubitschek, Abena Busia comprehends the significance of the African cultural patterns in Praisesong, though she does not fully explore them. Similarly she regards the song, dance, and rituals in Avey's journey as representing continuing African traditions in the New World. Likewise Paulette Brown-Hinds notes the significance of dance as healing ritual, but also explicates the connection between the Ringshout, the Big Drum dance, and the West African circle dance. Abena Busia also interprets Avey's journey as a reverse Middle Passage: a journey from the New World towards Africa which achieves wholeness. She aptly explains the significance of praisesongs within African culture and further concludes that "the whole narrative in itself acts as a 'praisesong' for the widow with the narrator as the griot" (199). Although Busia briefly makes mention of the Yoruba deity Legba, it is Eugenia Collier who not only connects Lebert Joseph to the African trickster deity but also expounds on his vital role in rituals, as I have described in Chapter One.

Similarly, Barbara Christian links John Lebert with Legba, although her analysis centres more on the ritual aspect of Praisesong. She interprets Avey's vomiting and emptying of her bowels as a purging and cleansing, as does Dorothy Hamer Denniston, Abena Busia, Joyce Pettis, and Paulette Brown-Hinds. Hinds is quite specific that Avey needs to purge and "disavow the oppressive Euro-Christian religious tradition which regards African-influenced dance rituals as profane..." (112).

In the same vein, Carole Boyce Davies reads Avey's boat trip mishap as her relieving herself of excess baggage, purging herself of "Western pollution" (25). This purging for Davies, Christian, and Gay Wilentz marks Avey's "rite-of-passage." Davies further views Praisesong as examining "the continuations of African culture in the New World and their connection to the parent. It is about the acceptance of common heritage in Africa for the total psychic well-being of the New World-African" (21). She reads Avey's journey as comprising two journeys--one to black experience and the other to female experience, and so discovers the African reverence for their elders, and her defined function within the family and community as "maternal, culture-bear[ing] and political" (32). Davies is perhaps the only critic that includes gender as well as race in her insightful analysis of Praisesong. Gay Wilentz' analysis includes gender but only in terms of heritage.

Wilentz' theory posits that the passing-on of stories from one generation to the next is a particularly female heritage. She positions Marshall as an example of this black female heritage where, as Marshall herself affirms, she mastered her story-telling skills from her foremothers. Wilentz's grasp of West African ancestral worship, reincarnation, and the use of "tribe" as I use it, truly reflects her years of living in West Africa. It is not surprising then that she understands Marshall's choice of Carriacou and Tatem as her "African" setting for Praisesong. Velma Pollard, too, realises Marshall's choice of location and further explicates the African linguistic similarities between the English based Gullah speech and the French based Creole patois that links Tatem to Carriacou.

Joyce Pettis, perhaps more than others, details the specific African cultural retentions evident in Praisesong. She calls attention to the remnants of Ibo/West African culture in Tatem: "the herbal practices of one neighbour, the carving ability of another, and the vegetable growing of a third suggest that these inhabitants of rural South Carolina have not veered too far from indigenous West African practices" (121). Pettis also points out ancestral dream visits as not only an aspect of West African ancestor influence in the lives of the living, but also the Carriacou Islander's way of perceiving the ancestors.

These readings, though insightful, differ from my

Africanist reading which brings to surface the particular African ways of knowing in Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow, thus clarifying those aspects of the novel that a Eurocentric reading might fail to recognise.

II: Ancestral Roots and Healing

> [T]he single most pervasive and consistent assumption of all black writing since the eighteenth century has been that there exists an unassailable, integral, black self, as compelling and as whole in Africa as in the New world.... What's more, this self was *knowable*, retrievable, [and] recuperable. (Henry Louis Gates Jr.)

> In order to develop a sense of our collective history...I think it is absolutely necessary for people to effect this spiritual return. As the history of people of African descent in the United States and the diaspora is fragmented and interrupted, I consider it my task as a writer to initiate readers to the challenges this journey entails. I am an unabashed ancestor worshipper. (Paule Marshall)

Paule Marshall's first two novels, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *The Chosen Place The Timeless People* certainly correspond to Gates' assertions above. Her first novel follows the search for a knowable self by Selina Boyce, a young African American girl of Caribbean parentage growing into womanhood in Brooklyn. The second novel shows the fragmented psyche of Merle Kinbona, a Caribbean woman who struggles to recuperate a whole self. In both novels, Marshall only hints at the possibility of wholeness for her

female protagonists, Selina and Merle. But in her third novel, Praisesong for the Widow--a compelling story of the rediscovery of an unassailable self for Avey Johnson, a sixty-four-year-old African American widow--Marshall finds the route to wholeness for the fragmented black psyche by reconnecting African spirituality and ancestors to their descendants in America and the Caribbean.

In an interview with Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, an African writer and literary critic, Marshall states that the objective of her work is "to bring about a synthesis of the cultures, and in addition, connect them up with the African experience" (Davies 24). In Praisesong, Marshall certainly achieves this synthesis and connection. That she sets Praisesong in Carriacou in the Caribbean and Tatem in South Carolina is not capricious, for both areas were isolated enough to have retained many aspects of the cultural patterns of the Africans that were brought there as slaves.[1] Marshall's knowledge and usage of African "survivals" also encourages an inherent understanding of African spirituality, which enables her to connect African diaspora cultural survivals to their African origins; her connections are not spurious; they reflect a profound perception of significant African traditions.

My reading of Praisesong is an Africanist one, for "Marshall's novels are in [a] sense, concerned with the articulation of an Africanist hermeneutics" (Gikandi 143).

It will be a reading which recognises this text in the same way Barbara Christian speaks of Beloved, as an "ancestral worship" and as an "African" work of art "that is central to African spirituality....a ritual grounded in active remembering" (Female Subjects 370). I should note that as Praisesong for the Widow is based on a West African cosmology, I use "spirituality" in the same sense as Joyce Pettis, not in Western Christian terms, but in a distinctively African sense.[2]

Marshall's world in Praisesong, like that of Morrison's in Beloved, is by essence an "African" one where the world of the dead interacts in a "continuum" with the living. Whereas Beloved interacts with her mother Sethe for destructive ends, great-aunt Cuney, the powerful ancestor, interacts with Avey Johnson, her grand-niece, for constructive reasons. John Mbiti explains ancestral visitations to "surviving relatives" as occurring through "dreams and visions" in order "to make their wishes known" (73). Similarly, great-aunt Cuney appears to Avey Johnson in a dream.

> And then three nights ago, in her dream, there the old woman had been after those years, drawn up waiting for her on the road beside Shad Dawson's wood of cedar and oak. Standing there unmarked by the grave in the field hat and the dress with the double belts, beckoning her with a hand that should have been fleshless bone by now: clappers to be played at a

juba. (Praisesong 40)

She accordingly makes her wishes known--she demands that Avey follow her to Tatem Landing, the place of Avey's childhood summer vacations where aunt Cuney passed down the story of the Ibo slaves, who on reaching the New World sensed what it had in store for them, and in defiance walked across the water back to Africa. Ibo and Yoruba peoples believe that when an ancestor instructs the living, these instructions must be obeyed, for whilst the ancestors are essentially benevolent, to disobey them would be to incur their wrath. The ancestors are believed to possess the ability to cause psychic disorder in those relatives who do not abide by traditions set down by them when alive. Consistent with this, Avey Johnson's refusal to follow the pleading and silent exhortation of Aunt Cuney's "Come/O will you come...?" to their customary walk to the Ibo heritage of Tatem Landing, inevitably results in her developing a physical "odd discomfort" and "vaguely bloated feeling" and "her eyes playing tricks on her;" turning fellow cruisers into nightmarish figures (Praisesong 52,56). As Gay Wilentz notes, "the physical reaction to the overrich" parfait is also "symptomatic of the spiritual malaise that Avey is suffering from..." (Obsidian 7). Her total withdrawal from her black past and immersion into bourgeois society of "*White* Plains" causes a "dis-ease" (italics mine).

Like Sethe in Beloved, Avey suffers from a psychic

fragmentation due to her disconnection from her black community, but Avey's disconnection reflects the problems of blacks in modern American society. In their struggle for success within an oppressive white-dominated society, Jay and Avey Johnson internalise white American negative views of blacks. Consequently, this leads to their condemnation of black communities, and desire to dissociate themselves from these communities and from black culture. Jay replaces his emotional connection with his wife with a cathexis to wealth; even when his accounting business becomes successful he refuses to retire and works himself to death. Nevertheless, as Keith Sandiford notes, "Marshall does not suggest that...[the] attendant increase in affluence and comfort, represents some unpardonable moral transgression" (383).

Within a traditional Africanist world view prosperity is indicative of ancestral and divine favour. When an individual prospers, he must use some of his wealth to improve his community; his refusal to do so results in his alienation from his community, catalising cosmological and communal imbalance. Thus, Avey's neglect of her family house and land in Tatem goes against African tradition and invokes ancestral anger and an unsettling interaction of the two worlds.

Joyce Pettis' discovery of the Oxford English Dictionary definition of *Avatara* as "the descent of a deity

to the earth in an incarnate form...," (132) is significant for this reader, for it also emphasises the importance of land and the prevalence of earth deities in Ibo society; one of Nigeria's largest ethnic groups found in Eastern Nigeria. The land serves not only as a "source of livelihood," but is also an essential aspect of the Ibo life and belief system. Avey's negligence of ancestral land can therefore be construed as a denial of her Southern/Ibo heritage. I will expand on the significance of the name "Avatara," and the importance of the land and ancestral veneration.

Marshall's depiction of Avey and Jerome's lives is not "anti-middle class rhetoric," but one which, as Joyce Pettis expounds;

> [I]llustrates...that diminished racial solidarity and impaired cultural identification exemplify behavioural characteristics of the fractured psyche. Fracturing offsets cultural homogeneity in many ways: through intraracial self-distancing, rejection of cultural identification, voluntary geographical separatism, concealing or rejecting the personal past, dismissing the historic past, and obsessive materialism. (13)

Marshall illustrates the problem of black social and material aspirations to the detriment and exclusion of the individual's connection to the black community at large, and the psychic effect this can have on the individual. Avey's and Jerome's life cautions blacks, who like Jerome having

experienced the harsh reality for blacks in mainstream America, decide that the only way to achieve economic success is to distance themselves from blackness. This distancing, denial of one's identity and loathing of the intrinsic parts of one's self, clearly results in a psychic fragmentation of the individual.

Marshall shows how Avatara over the years has become Avey Johnson--a bourgeois black woman living in white society. Aunt Cuney, therefore, reenters Avey's life to cure her of this psychic fracture by disrupting Avey's cruise and taking her on a spiritual journey towards healing. As Avey has been spiritually asleep for so long, it takes a potent female ancestral power like great-aunt Cuney to reach into Avey's dream and break the sleep. The wise ancestor knows that she must drag Avey back and yet forward "in the direction of the Landing," then beyond that to the Caribbean, taking her spirit eastward to Africa; all the way back to the "Ibos."[3]

Marshall's title Praisesong for the Widow, indicates this direction towards Africa. Praisesong, what the Yoruba term oriki--a heroic poem recited or sung, which pays homage and acknowledges historical deeds--also refers to a religious song commonly used by African and African American congregations.[4] Within an African perspective, Marshall's title fits perfectly into Avatara Johnson's predestined role of the griot. In Yoruba society the griot's praisesong

relates past history and conveys the tradition of the people to the next generation. The role of the griot is passed from one generation to the next: the first Avatara, passes the role to her grandchild Cuney, who likewise passes it on to her grand-niece Avey.

Aunt Cuney's cosmological view expresses a pervasive African, and particularly Ibo, belief in the "legitimating role of the ancestors [ndichie] in the affairs of the living" (Aniakor 17). Just as aunt Cuney enters the realms of the ancestors after her death, there exists another ancestor before her who guides and legitimates aunt Cuney's role as the family elder. Unlike Avey, aunt Cuney relates to her cultural beliefs and traditions, and so takes seriously ancestral visitations and wishes.

> There was the story of how she [aunt Cuney] had sent word months before her [Avey's] birth that it would be a girl and she was to be called after her grandmother who had come to her in a dream with the news: "its my gran' done sent her. She's her little girl." (Praisesong 42)

These actions express a West African belief in reincarnation--Avey is marked out before birth because she embodies part of the spirit of her great-grandmother and family ancestor. By listening to her ancestor, aunt Cuney continues the steady flow of family history.

Reincarnation arguably persists as one of the commonalities within different West African belief systems

and African diaspora cultures. It expresses the African notion of time; the present connects to the past and these reflect the future in cyclical non-linear motion.

> The living community is the link which unites the ancestors and the unborn generations. The idea of 'reincarnation,' present in some societies, is one way of affirming the time-transcending continuity in human existence. (Booth 8)

Within Ibo and Yoruba worlds there exists a strong belief in reincarnation, and naming the reborn child forms an important part of the link with the ancestors. Names are generally considered an integral part of the individual, for they carry cultural meanings; they link the individual to the family and the community at large, and determine the child's destiny and personality. For example within Yoruba culture:

> Oruko eya names are those given to partial reincarnations of an ancestor, such as grandmother or grandfather. The reincarnation is partial because...the spirit of the ancestor continues to exist in orun, but part of it dwells in the newborn... These names indicate the spiritual qualities and propensities of the person, stressing their connection to the past, the ancestors... (Abiodun, Drewal, Pemberton 260)

Avey therefore rightly bears an oruko eya--"*Avatara*"--her great-grandmother's name, signifying her affinity with the dead *Avatara*, and her predestined role as the bearer of

family traditions and history. It also represents an Ibo ancestry, and signifies the importance of land within Ibo culture, for the Ibo consider the land "as something... [that] had an essence, hence it was encrusted with rituals of fertility as homage to the ancestor's..." (Aniakor 13). The land--ani--exists as the "generative principle" within the Ibo universe, thus the pervasiveness of land cults in Ibo societies, and the personification of the land as ani obi; "the heart of the land" (Aniakor 13). Marshall's carefully considered naming of her protagonist reflects her awareness of the importance of naming within African society. In light of the Ibo connection to the land, her use of a Hindu mythical name, *Avatara*, cannot be ignored. It becomes easier to understand that the first *Avatara* "just picked herself up and took off after'em. In her mind. Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos..." (Praisesong 39). One so connected to the earth, named after a deity who descended to earth in an incarnate form is inextricably linked to the land. Avatara is the Ibo ndichie ani, the ancestor and earth deity who symbolically represents the essence of Ibo world. Avey's rejection of her name "Avatara" therefore indicates a denial of self, and of her black Southern/Ibo heritage, as well as her pre-destined role as griot.

Avey believes that by disrupting her cruise to make her journey home to "White Plains," she can escape aunt

Cuney and the nagging notion that "in instilling the story of the Ibos in her child's mind, the old woman had entrusted her with a mission she couldn't even name yet had felt duty bound to fulfill" (Praisesong 42). But once she steps off the *Bianca Pride*, which signifies the essence of bourgeois materialist white lifestyle, Avey begins the "sleeper's wake," and a journey towards rebirth. Marshall's naming of the cruise ship is certainly meaningful. Luxury cruises to the Caribbean usually have nothing to do with understanding the culture and the people of the different Islands encountered; the black Islander still remain the "other," who is displayed for his entertainment value.

Whilst waiting for a taxi, dressed as the epitome of her American middle class status, Avey Johnson is drawn into the wave of busy black bodies on the port. Her attempts to fight the wave that draws and connects her to the Carriacou Islanders are fruitless; an Islander mistakes her for "a woman he knows named Ida" who could pass for Avey's twin, shattering Avey's opinion of herself as distinct from the sea of black bodies. Like Maya Angelou's discovery whilst in Ghana, Avey is about to discover an identity and spirituality that (re)connects the children of African descent to an African identity.[5]

In the West Indies, an African diaspora with strong African linguistic and religious retention and recreations, Avey can begin her spiritual journey home. As Dorothy

Denniston contends, "before psychological equilibrium becomes possible, [the] manifestations of fracturing must be confronted and resolved" (13). Avey eventually confronts her past, and realises that in their striving to live the American dream, she and Jay had given "*Too Much*" of "the most valuable part of themselves" (Praisesong 139).

> [S]omething in those small rites, an ethos they held in common, had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay's to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible. And this link, these connections, heard in the music and in the praisesongs of a Sunday: "...*I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were/young...*," had both protected them and put them in possession of a kind of power... (Praisesong 137)

By assessing the richness of her life with Jay before their social and economic advancement, Avey perceives her descent into spiritual barrenness and disconnection from a nurturing black community. Like "a backslider on the threshing floor," she mourns the death of Jay and Avatara Johnson--the once joyful couple who celebrated and knew, as the Langston Hughes poem suggests, that "the source of African American heritage" was in "African cultural roots" (Denniston 136). In Grenada she begins a metaphysical regression that will facilitate her rebirth and healing. Having confronted the errors of her past she "awakened...like a *tabula rasa* upon which a whole new history could be written" (Praisesong

151).

Like a lost child, Avey drifts aimlessly on a beach and into the shelter of Lebert Joseph, the Carriacou elder who becomes her spiritual guide, and "leads her back, at this crossroads in her life, to the ancestors whose spirits she has neglected, or sacrificed..." (Busia 204). The typical "African" elder, Lebert carries with him a wealth of history which enables him to detail his relationship as an individual within the immediate and extended family, and beyond that, within the "tribe"/"nation." Similarly, he demands to know Avey's "nation;" the individual identity includes not just the familial, but also the "tribal." Although initially disappointed, he knows that Avey was not alone in her lack of knowledge and disengagement from her historical past: "it have quite a few people like you. People who can't call their nation" (Praisesong 176-77). Lebert voices the historical disconnection of African slaves from their "nation," and the wilful forgetting by the modern generation of blacks of their black heritage as well as their lack of alliance with a black community.

Although many have interpreted Lebert Joseph as representing Esu/Legba, the important Yoruba deity of the crossroads, I prefer to see him more specifically as the Yoruba Ifa priest, "someone who possessed ways of seeing that went beyond mere sight and ways of knowing that outstripped ordinary intelligence (*Li gain connaissance*) and

thus had no need for words" (Praisesong 172). The Ifa priest who carries with him the wisdom of Ifa, plays a central role within the community. As the diviner and healer, everyone within the community has contact with him at different passages of life, such as birth, marriage and death, as well as for everyday problems. With his *connaissance* he unravels and resolves the crisis and mysteries of the world, thus the orisa (deity) he works with is Esu/Elebga.[6] Lebert Joseph accordingly acts as Legba's emissary. As an elder and Ifa priest, he possesses a storehouse of cultural and cosmological knowledge. He knows that the ancestors--"the Old Parents," "the Long Time People"--must be revered and given offerings, for not to "give them remembrance" effects cosmological and psychic instability of the neglectful children. Appropriately, he leads and organises the "Beg Pardon" for the ancestors. During ritual moments in Voudon, and traditional Yoruba religion, this deity "mounts" his priest, shape-shifting from the ancient ageless man to an energetic animated youth, as Lebert Joseph does in the Nation dance, when calling for "Papa Legba" to "ouvri barrier pou' mwe" (Praisesong 148). As the Ifa priest he knows that his deity must always be acknowledged in ritual and sacrificial situations; Legba opens the door to the intangible world.

Avey now needs to take "the first step in the ritual healing," and as Barbara Christian further points out, this

"is often that felt need for healing, although the cause of disease may be unknown. Often that felt need, as in African ritual, is expressed in the confusion of the senses or of outer and inner reality" (Callaloo 77).

Lebert Joseph's rum shop becomes his consultation room where the priest sits and listens to his patient; the Ifa priest is both healer and psychoanalyst. In this confession calming situation, Avey finds herself recounting her psychic ordeals since her dreams and struggles with aunt Cuney. Lebert Joseph's role as the priest is not to ask the patient what ails her but rather to allow the patient to volunteer this information. Listening enables him to decipher her problems and so prescribe the proper ritual solution. In listening to Avey, he deduces that her spiritual disquiet springs from her withdrawal from her past; her healing must consequently involve retracing and re-immersion into this past.

With the help of Lebert Joseph, Avey reaches into her memory and recalls a ritual dance called "Juba." This marks the commencement of the praisesong for the widow; "a wa la wa juba," in Yoruba this means we have come to pay homage, to sing praisesongs--significantly and ironically similar to Lebert's song "We di la wen juba" (Praisesong 179). In order that she can be whole again, Avey must pay homage to her ancestors in the Carriacou Island annual "Beg Pardon." Like the Yoruba "Egungun" annual festival, the "Pardone mwe"

allows the living to remember their ancestors, and to chant praisesongs to these spiritual guides.[7]

Lebert Joseph fittingly places Avey, on her boat journey to Carriacou, in the midst of the oldest women, whose potent powers facilitate healing. These "African" mothers surround her like a womb, bearing Avey to her (re)birth. Like an infant emerging from a difficult birth, Avey vomits and cannot control her bowels. But the mothers function as the midwives, calming and soothing her with reassuring voices; "*Bon, li bon.*" In the process of being reborn, like the abiku Beloved, Avey's collective consciousness and "rememory" is awakened; she experiences an active consciousness of the horrors and suffering of the Middle Passage. This cathartic experience takes her mind back to the Ibos, to envision her ancestors' nightmare journey to the New World in a way that made her suffering "of no consequence" (Praisesong 209).

Suffering the fatigue of rebirth, Avey enters the final stages of her spiritual journey home. Lebert Joseph continues to perform his healer's role and leaves her in the safe care of his daughter, Rosalie Parvey, another "African" mother who inherently possesses a female gift of healing. Like the Cincinnati community of women in Beloved, she assists Avey's recovery into wholeness, and figuratively baptises her, washing and stretching her limbs as one would a newborn. Barbara Christian's reading of this sensual

African ritual healing process cannot be matched, hence I will quote extensively from her analysis.

> Still a novitiate, and must be prepared for her first Big Drum. When she [Avey] awakens in Carriacou, her body feels as her mind had felt on her first morning in Grenada: "Flat, numb, emptied..." Like her mind, her body must be healed. The bathing rite, the laying on of hands which Rosalie Parvey performs on Avey is sensual in a pleasurable way, as Avey's expulsion of artificiality is sensual in a horrifying way. Central to African ritual is the concept that the body and spirit are one. Thus sensuality is essential to the process of healing and rebirth of the spirit. (81)

While Barbara Christian does not juxtapose this ritual with the Christian notions of laying on of hands, I do to a certain extent agree with Velma Pollard that Marshall avoids "Christian/Western symbol of cleansing by baptism (water and blood). The rituals that are really important in the parent African societies are birth and death" (396). Whereas Christianity requires that its adherents mortify and discourage sensuality of the flesh, but keep the spirit alive, African spirituality unites the body and the spirit. Rosalie Parvey's kneading of Avey's dead flesh marks her physical and spiritual rebirth into the psychic wholeness that she once had with her husband, before their immersion into a Western routine and mechanical life.

Similarly Jerome's Johnson's lack of sexual passion

marks a difference from the black heritage-conscious sensual Jay, who

> would lie within her like a man who has suddenly found himself inside a temple of some kind...and sensing around him the invisible forms of the deities who reside there: Erzulie..., Yemoja,..Oya... Jay might have found himself surrounded by a pantheon of the most ancient deities who had made their temple the tunnelled darkness of his wife's flesh. (Praisesong 127)

By first describing Jay and Avey's coupling with a poetic insertion of West African female deities and then recounting the couples' later lack of physical pleasure in their pursuit of material wealth, Marshall illustrates the black/African intertwining of physicality and spirituality.*

Having ejected the bitter bile of her erroneous treatment of her past from her system, Avey develops an awareness and understanding of Tatem "African" traditions that she had perhaps not quite comprehended in the past.

> Today, presented with the candle and the innocent ear of corn on the buffet in the main room where she had been brought after getting dressed, she found nothing odd or disconcerting about them. They were no more strange than the plate of food that used to be placed beside the coffin at funerals in Tatem. (Praisesong 225)

Cultural practices that she had suppressed come surging up to fill the "empty plate of her mind," effecting her

acceptance of the many nuances of black/African culture. Her spiritual rebirth and ritual cleansing denote her journey from childhood to womanhood in readiness for her to join in the ancestral veneration, the "Beg Pardon" that will bind her to her past and so move her onward.

The "nation dances" and "summoning of the Old Parents" marks the crucial moment in Avey's healing ritual. It is in effect Great-aunt Cuney's last beckon "Come/O will you come?" Avey responds by finally joining in the dance, and through memory joins the Tatem "Ring Shout." The dance connects the living and dead ancestors, not just recent ancestors, but those that are historically African. Walter F. Pitts explains the African origin of the counterclockwise circle dance.

> The ringshout of North America is a form of African-derived ritual that was common form of black worship..., worshippers performed the ringshout, an event combining dance and song where participants would shuffle their feet in a counterclockwise circle... According to one historian, this particular form of dance worship shows "close parallels between the style of dancing observed in African and Caribbean cult worship."... Those parallels, like the counterclockwise circle in which participants never lift their feet from the ground, are seen in...dance among the Ekoi people of southern Nigeria. [And] the West African Ibo, Yoruba... perform the counterclockwise shuffle... (92-93).

The ringshout dance expresses the African's recreation of Christianity, interpreting it within his/her own structure of religious practice, whilst the Big nation dance illustrates the African's syncretic mix of his/her traditional religion with Christianity. Through these dances, Marshall creates a spiritual chain which links Black America, the Caribbean, and Africa "to bring about a synthesis of the two cultures and, in addition, to connect them up with the African experience" (Davies 24). Through an "active remembering," Avey's healing goes beyond an individual healing; it is "a far-reaching, wide-ranging confraternity" (Praisesong 249). For "healing in Africa has to do with preservation or restoration of human vitality in the context of the community as a whole" (Booth 8). Avey's dance and healing rituals restores her fragmented psyche and reconnects her to a nurturing black community, for the individual's wholeness also depends on their bond with their community.

The realisation of aunt Cuney's ancestral quest comes through Avey's reconnection with her true self; she remembers that she is not simply '"Avey,"... but always "Avey, short for Avatara" (Praisesong 251). As Barbara Christian so succinctly explains, "that Avey now recognizes herself as Avatara is also essential to the ritual, for in African cosmology it is through summon, through the correct naming of a thing, that it comes into existence. By knowing

her proper name, Avey becomes herself" (Callaloo 83). By giving voice to her name, Avatara also pays homage to the ancestor who bore that name too, an ancestor whose spirit she carries.

As Avatara, she is reunited with the Ibo spirit of her female ancestors--aunt Cuney and great-grandmother Avatara--and can "acknowledge the indelible imprint of her collective African heritage and reclaim her preordained role as a chronicler of history" (Denniston 127). Avatara too becomes an ancestor figure, a wise "African" mother and griot who passes traditions and history down to the next generation. What she did not do with her children she can redress with her grandsons. She can fulfill her duty and retire to her familial community--Tatem--where she will teach the Tatem Landing Ibo story to the next generation as her great-aunt Cuney had taught her. Within a West African and especially Ibo view, Avey's resolution to repair her ancestral home is appropriate; it shows a respect for the ancestors. In paying homage to her ancestors, the widow ensures that the flow of traditions continues, and she will in turn receive praisesongs from the next generation.

As the griot, her role also involves singing the praisesongs, retelling her story to the larger black community so that they resist succumbing to a material god. They must, like herself and Jay, stop believing that the only way to economic advancement is through a rejection of

African American culture, and, connected with this, their African heritage.

Marshall's Praisesong "names the source of African American heritage," showing through her protagonist Avatara Johnson's life that "without an active acknowledgement and appreciation of African cultural roots, blacks fall prey to spiritual barrenness leading to personal disintegration and disconnectedness" (Denniston 136). She shows the difficulty blacks have in their attempt at economic success within mainstream America, without losing the essential aspects of their identity to a larger society that associates blackness with negativity. She reminds blacks--African Americans, Caribbeans, and Africans--of their connected heritage and the importance of respecting that heritage. If blacks lack regard for those intrinsic elements of Africa/black culture, for their ways of being, how can others view them with any respect? As Avatara Johnson realises, social and economic success for blacks, must not include a denial and distancing of oneself from the black community.

Arguably Marshall does not indict middle-class black America for their economic success, but rather indicts them for their over-assimilation into mainstream America, as well as their embracing of white culture whilst denying and rejecting black culture. Jerome Johnson not only adopts Protestant work ethics, he also adopts white American values. He develops a contempt and mistrust of fellow

blacks, regarding them as people only interested in senseless pleasures, dancing and idling around, expecting white America to hand them favours. Jerome makes no attempts to give something back to the poor black community he has risen from, but instead pulls up the economic ladder behind him.

By (re)connecting Avey Johnson to her African traditions, Marshall reminds blacks of the positive aspects and potential survival mechanisms of their African heritage. Marshall posits that if blacks can accept and understand the nuances of their African/black traditions, beliefs, and philosophy, which Marshall illustrates in Praisesong, they can perhaps recuperate their fractured psyche.

She demonstrates that the "black self" is knowable, retrievable, and recuperable but only through the individual's acceptance of the collective black identity and heritage. Her connections of Africa cultural patterns with African American and Caribbean ones express ways of knowing which consciously and unconsciously inform Praisesong for the Widow. She displays a depth of understanding of the importance of naming, ancestral veneration, spirituality, and rituals of healing within African religious world view, that reveal an inherent comprehension of Black/African spirituality. With this knowledge she proposes a "fixing methodology" for the fractured black psyche.

Conclusion

> When I was writing about good and evil, I really wasn't writing about them in Western terms. It was interesting to me that black people at one time seemed not to respond to evil in the ways other people did, but that they thought evil had a natural place in the universe; they did not wish to eradicate it. They just wished to protect themselves from it, maybe even to manipulate it, but they never wanted to kill it. They thought evil was just another aspect of life. The ways black people dealt with evil accounted in my mind for how they responded to a lot of other things. It's like a double-edged sword... Evil is not an alien force; its just a different force. (Toni Morrison in Conversations With Toni Morrison)

Morrison's understanding of black conceptualisation of good and evil undeniably reflects an "African" understanding of the world, ways of knowing passed down from Africa to its descendants, knowledge that years of living in the New World have not eradicated. Such ways of knowing, of philosophising about concepts like good and evil, is part of the African's survival mechanism, the ways in which he/she understands and stabilizes his/her cosmos. The pervasive presence of ancestors in African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American literature and cultural beliefs indicates African's deep-seated bond to his/her ancestors.

Those like Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall, who give active memory to these ancestors, who through their works pay homage to the ancestors, express the African ways of knowing that guide their works. This bond to the ancestors perhaps gives Morrison the courage to pass on "unspeakable" stories, and so remember the "disremembered and unaccounted for" (Beloved 274).

Marshall clearly understands the Black/African custom of passing on traditions, for the novel embraces the ancestors' legitimating roles and the elders as the bearers and conveyers of tradition. Praisesong is Marshall's own "juba"--homage to an ancestor; she dedicates the novel to her grandmother "Du-dah." The "African" female ancestral presence thus exists not just within the novel but in Marshall's own life. Praisesong also shows that Marshall is a griot, a storyteller in the African tradition, for she not only tells a story but also chronicles history and traditions within a didactic frame.

Both Marshall and Morrison understand the importance of naming; Avatara and Beloved are carefully considered meaningful names that express African traditions of naming. Beloved bears her name, for she is Sethe's beloved, and as the spirit child who has memory of the Middle Passage, she reminds us of those beloved "sixty million and more" who never made it across the oceans. By naming them through Beloved, Morrison calls them out of their name, and so

acknowledges them, bringing them, like Beloved, from beneath the waters, surfacing once more in our memories. Marshall's protagonist, Avatara, the ancestral reincarnation, who experiences briefly the Middle Passage ordeal of her ancestors, too forces us to remember those departed ancestors. This naming also speaks to the sense of loss that the African slaves endured, for their African names, which linked them to family and community and their perception of the world, were denied them in the New World.

Marshall's avatars are truly African, not merely in the biological sense, but in a spiritual sense. The Africanisms in Praisesong go far beyond "isms;" they express African ways of knowing and, as Marshall says, "the sea ain't got no back door... I come from a people for whom language is an art, and, for me, this sense of language comes from Africa; not to mention a sense of theatre which is profoundly African" (Sage 53). Paule Marshall's and Toni Morrison's works show that they are themselves "Avataras," descendants of Africa with an inherited "African" cosmological perspective, and this clearly influences their writing. When one employs African belief systems and philosophy to read their works, the "African" ways of knowing which influence their novels become apparent. To understand the cosmological perspective of their African American and Caribbean characters and communities is to understand the African cosmological viewpoint.

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APPENDIX

Notes

Preface

[1]. Benjamin Ray gives examples of some of the different African ethnic groups and explains the historical and geographical dynamics of their religious beliefs. I should also note that I quote Ray's encyclopedic overview of African Religions, because he is one of the most respected scholars in this area. I would like to thank Dr Rosalind Hackett for pointing out contemporary thoughts on Mbiti's and Benjamin's works.

The common elements within African religions that I will focus on will be ritual action--what I will mostly refer to as process of healing--and the belief in the interaction of the spirit world and the world of the living, divinities, and ancestor spirits.

[2] See Clovis E. Semmens' explanation for the Herskovits/Frazier argument on African Survivals.

[3] See Semmens: Sterling Stuckey's "Slave Culture" identifies African culture in the New world as retentions--"African survivals." See John Roach's "Circum Atlantic performance" in his book Cities of the Dead. Roach views African cultural survivals as recreations and hybridisation of Circum Atlantic worlds of Europe, Africa and the Americas.

Chapter One

[1]. Again I use "African" as an ideal type, with an awareness of the fact that though John Mbiti's work was ground breaking in its time, it is now viewed as problematic because of its over-generalisation about "African" thoughts.

[2]. Other examples of Morrison's ancestral females who are prone to excessive behaviour can be seen in Pilate's excessive love for Hagar in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Eva's excessive control of her family in Morrison's *Sula*.

[3] For a literary critical approach and explanation of Jung's theory on "racial memory," and the "collective unconscious" see Geurin et al. 154 and 176-77.

[4] Other examples of Morrison's women who express an African dual female personality of good and evil, and are powerful but dangerous women are Sula, the novel's pariah, and Eva, the nurturing yet restricting mother in Morrison's *Sula*

Chapter Two

[1] See Gay Wilentz's explanation of why the West Indies has more African retentions than America.

[2] Joyce Pettis uses Linda James Meyers to describe African spirituality as "the first construct of traditional African philosophical thought, the notion that there is a pervasive energy, that is the source, sustainer, and essence of all phenomenon" (19). This I interpret as the Yoruba <u>ase</u>. As I explain through Mbiti in Chapter One, the African is by

essence spiritual, for his religion is his philosophy.

[3] Denniston notes that in Praisesong Marshall moves the locale from North America to the Caribbean, which symbolically points eastward towards Africa.

[4] Dorothy Hamer Denniston only makes mention of "praisesong" as a religious song used by African American congregations. I add African congregations as I am familiar with praisesongs in Yoruba "Aladura" churches, which mix African traditional religious worship format and Christianity--the Yoruba interpretation of Christianity.

[5] In her biography All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes, Maya Angelou relates how some Ghanian women pull her into a market groaning, crying, and clearly distressed. Not understanding the calamity she asks her guide for an explanation, only to be told that these women believe her to be a descendant of one of their many people stolen and taken as slaves in the past.

[6] See Wande Abimbola for further explanations on Ifa and the Esu and the Ifa priest within Yoruba society.

[7] See Abimbola for further explanations on Yoruba ancestral annual Egungun festival.

[8] My juxtaposing of Christian and Western perceptions of the body and the spirit and Avey and Jay Johnson's pre-and-post-economic-success sexuality was pointed out to me by professor John Zomchick, who rightly sensed that this argument fitted well with my thesis.

About the Author.

Ayoade Olulanu Joy Asekun received the B.A. degree in English from Lagos State University, Lagos, Nigeria. In August 1998, she completed the M.A. degree in English at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. "Binary Fusions: Good and Evil and the Figuring of the Abiku in Toni Morrison's Beloved," a paper she presented at the College Language Association Annual Conference, Tallahassee, Florida, April 1998, served as a precursor to this Thesis.