The Search for Wholeness and Diaspora Literacy in Contemporary African American Literature

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Edited by

Silvia Pilar Castro-Borrego

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To our Spiritual Guides,

who comfort and heal us,

directing our steps towards the future.

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PREFACE

JOHNNELLA E. BUTLER

African American women writers have led the way in engaging the significances of identity, experience, the past, and the present. Moreover, they have provided us with literary content that, when engaged theoretically toward the end of understanding the relationship between the universal and the particular, can help us rediscover the innovative significance of the humanities to our local, regional, and global changes, conflicts and challenges—beginning with understanding our various relationships to the world and to each other. Each text discussed in this book reflects the epigraph that Silvia Pilar Castro Borrego chose to introduce her chapter on Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* in which Marshall underscores the "the importance of truly confronting the past, both in personal and historical terms, and the necessity of reversing the present order." The implications of Marshall's observation for socio-cultural policy are enormous, for if realized, we could then begin to establish a shared human context for the political, economic, cultural, and technological challenges of the 21st century.

Engaging identity as these essays do allows us to become aware, as Ernesto Laclau purports, of the "unresolved tension between universalism and particularism [that] opens the way to a movement away from Western Eurocentrism, … [that] was a result of a discourse which did not differentiate between the universal values the West was advocating and the concrete social agents that were incarnating them. Now, however, we can proceed to a separation of the two aspects.[1] Laclau sees universalism as a horizon that expands while "its necessary attachment to any particular content is broken." Therefore, identity, the colonial, the postcolonial, whether in regard to the concrete social agents advocating Western universalism or the concrete social agents relegated to particularism outside the universal—and hence, the human—bring conflict between the self and other as well as the connections and similarities between the oppositional self and other to

[1] Ernesto Laclau, "Universalism, Particularism and the Question of Identity" in *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, Linda Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, eds. (Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2003), 367.

the foreground to be recognized and engaged. The horizon expands. For example, Janie, in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, "pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net"—the net bringing in life's possibilities as her relationship with Tea Cake reveals the possibilities of the horizon.[2] In this way she engages the paradox of universalism and particularism, the paradox that Laclau demonstrates cannot be solved, but rather engaged dialogically:

> the very precondition of democracy. The solution of the paradox would imply that a particular body had been found, which would be the true body of the universal. But in that case, the universal would have found its necessary location and democracy would not be possible.[3]

Democracy here, with the lower case "d," embodies the political expressions and solutions freely evolving from debates and interactions between minority and majority, the self and other, to result in shared power and the reconciliation of tensions and conflicts through the engagement of experience and generation of knowledge through dialogue. And dialogue is the particular human attribute that can identify and provide the space for such possibilities. In a 2009 interview about her book *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison says that the big lesson of this novel is that "You have to learn to be a human being. You have to learn. And when you do learn, it's [deciding] what stuff you have to give up—like gender, race"[4] The humanities and these essays in *The Search for Wholeness and Diaspora Literacy in Contemporary African American Literature* have the potential to guide us toward the discovery of what it means to be human, how the sites of our humanity change with time and experience, and how ourselves and our experiences connect with one another with groups, communities, locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. They can help us rid of the stuff that prevents us from being human and humane, by engaging identity, experience, objectivity, re-memory, double consciousness as they play out in both self and other in the dialogics of wholeness.

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[2] Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1937, 1978), 286.
[3] Laclau, 367.
[4] AARP (American Association of Retired Persons), January and February 2009, 22, 24.

INTRODUCTION

FROM FRAGMENTATION TO WHOLENESS, AN EXPLORATION[1]

SILVIA PILAR CASTRO-BORREGO

> It's not that we haven't always been there, since there was here. It is that the letters of our names have been scrambled when they were not totally erased, and our fingerprints upon the handles of history have been called the random brushings of birds.
> —Audre Lorde, Foreword to *Wild Women in the Whirlwind*

> Afro-Americans, having survived by word of mouth—and made of that a high art—remain at the mercy of literature and writing; often, these have betrayed us.
> —Sherley Ann Williams. Author's note to *Dessa Rose*

1. The Recovery of History and the Search for Historical Wholeness

The African presence as a source of both spiritual and thematic inspiration in contemporary fictional works by black women in the United States is continuous and strong. African American women writers have been involved for the last thirty years in a project of deconstruction and reconstruction of the past through mythology and re-memory, discovering new ways of structuring and developing narrative devices, and striving to reveal their cultural realities. In doing this, they cannot ignore the origins of African American culture in the dark period of colonization and slavery.

[1] The editor wish to acknowledge the support provided by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Research for the writing of this volume (Research Project FEM2010-18142).

Neither can they deny the vestiges of African world views that their rich oral tradition has kept alive for nearly four hundred years of struggle with "whiteness." Thus, re-memory involves taking apart or deconstructing the past: on the one hand, identifying the gaps—the something somebody forgot to tell somebody—and on the other, reconstructing the understanding of the past and the present by filling in those gaps. Lily Wang Lei's chapter in this book with the title "Troublesome Tricksters: Memory, Objet a, Foreignness, Abjection and Healing in Morrison's *Beloved* and *Love*," demonstrates how Morrison aptly uses the trickster's aesthetic and the trickster's figure in order to enhance dialogue and emphasize community as a way of healing for Morrison's trauma-inlflicted characters. According to Wang Lei, Beloved incarnates the Lacanian objet a, merging it with the Kristevan object and the Kleinian object. Thus, re-memory as a process captures an emotional memory, which for Wang Lei, is the memory trace that bears witness to the existence of the Lacanian objet a, giving body and voice to the haunting effect of the invisible yet indelible Lacanian real.

Contemporary African American women writers have different ways of envisioning the uses of the past within their work. However, they all seem to agree on the importance of re-memory as a dynamic source of "willed creation" that contains the potential for spiritual recovery.[2] According to Toni Morrison, re-memory involves the re-creation of the untold and unwritten interior lives of black people and of their ancestors, and consists of the gathering of "the memories within," as well as "the recollections of others," engaging through the imagination in the reconstruction of the world "that these remains imply."[3] Therefore, the "image," the starting point, is a visual strategy based on memory that matures and is recreated in fiction; a kind of recollection that moves "from the image to the text."[4] Hence, African American women's perception and representation of history in their fiction claim the imagination, the kind of knowledge that resides in experience and memory, since the image reproduced in the text encompasses the picture and "the feelings that accompany the picture."[5] The image as an archeological remnant, as a means of exploring the interior life that was not written, implies the revelation of truth and the reconstruction of the world, bringing up a kind of reality that has not been revealed before. In this way, Toni Morrison emphasizes the necessity to build a collective historical memory, of

[2] Toni Morrison, "Memory, Creation and Writing" in *Thought* 59 (1984): 385.
[3] Toni Morrison "The Site of Memory" in William Zinsser, ed. *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (Boston: Houghton, 1987), 112.
[4] Ibid., 113.
[5] Ibid., 113.

remembering a past that, although in some ways desirable to forget, is impossible to forget. Telling one's story, as Isabelle Van Peteghem's chapter in this volume entitled "Womanism, Sexual Healing and The Suture of Eco-Spirituality in Alice Walker's novels" reminds us, is very important because it weaves a link of intimacy with the audience and also with the readers, because it erases the split of the ego and enables it to have access to wholeness whenever "subversive resilience" is gained in the process. Through art, the black woman writer is able to explore her sense of spirituality because she connects with her ancestors, since the artist is committed to re-writing history from the woman's point of view and art becomes the way for the characters to find a voice and achieve resilience. Analysing Alice Walker's work, Van Peteghem asserts the need to regain faith in the original cosmic mother, linking eco-spirituality and sexuality, exploring the idea that sexuality is sacred: it is an embrace of life-force and earth energies, as part of the journey towards wholeness.

African American culture is shaped by a sense of spirituality and religion which historically reaches back to the old African roots, producing a syncretic common ground.[6] This common ground consists of the multiple, imbricating and sometimes contradictory shades of culture and epistemology that throughout time have shaped African American world views, providing an excellent opportunity to set out critical explorations of spirituality as an essential dimension of African American experience. This unique cultural and sociological understanding of spirituality in African American cultural expression is reflected in a new sense of acceptance by African American women's writings. Contemporary writings unite against the dominant Anglo-American world views that emphasize isolation as a virtue, praise separation, and reject trust in human subjective and social relations. African American cultural modes of being seek constantly a basic harmony of connectedness.

Harmony is an important term as it is perceived according to the ancient concepts of African religion: the message is transmitted again with a freshness that still has its effects upon us.[7] These ideas reach back to the principle of polarity, in which opposites are not seen as conflictive, but on the contrary, they make up the whole in life. According to this ancient principle, "all manifested things have two sides, two aspects, two poles or

[6] Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper, 1941)
R. Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1984).
[7] Paul Carter Harrison, *The Drama of Nommo* (New York: Grove, 1972)
Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1987).

a pair of opposites with manifold degrees between the two extremes"[8] arguing that opposites are only opposite according to a degree. In this view, the tensions between the opposites are seen as generative. As both Paul Carter Harrison and Molefi Kete Asante explain, it is through Nommo, the life force, that the generative tensions between matter and spirit, good and evil, male and female, self and community/culture etc., enter into a harmonious dialogic, and suggest the existence of a state in which the physical and the spiritual fuse in the rhythms of life, creating the nexus to ancestral power. This state corresponds to the time when gods walked the earth, when people had divine knowledge, and in African-American folklore, when people could fly.[9]

Through the enactment of re-memory, characters such as Avey Johnson in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, published in 1983, enter into a spiritual journey that leads them closer to their African roots. Usually it is the presence of the figure of the ancestor that functions as a mediator between the present and the past, as Silvia Castro's essay reminds us. In Avey's case, the remembrance of the conversations with her Aunt Cuney in the Sea-Islands, where she spent the summer as a child, and her later encounter with Lebert Joseph, who incarnates her Ibo ancestors, drive her to accompany Joseph to the island of Carriacou where she performs a spiritual reclamation via her participation in an ancestral native dance: the *Beg Pardon.* Once she has acknowledged her spiritual reconnection with her West African roots, Avey is ready to return to the island of her childhood and truly reconnect with the ancestral presence in her life. The idea of ancestry functions then in this novel as a reenactment of many stories that constitute African American spiritual history.

The stories remembered by these characters have an intrinsic reliance on orature, disrupting the written records of white, male historiography, and relying on the words and actions that the ancestral presence brings into their lives. Thus they fill a huge gap in historiography and literature: the missing voice of the black slave woman. As Inma Pineda points our in her chapter "A Celebration of Black Female Ancestors: Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," conjure-women were forgotten and erased from a common American past that eagerly tried to detach itself from the mysterious and subjective knowledge that for generations conjurers passed on orally. Gloria Naylor's understanding of the natural world extends to include the supernatural helping to shape consciousness on an everyday basis.

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[8] *The Kybalion. Hermetic Philosophy.* Chapter X: "Polarity" www.ardue.org.uk/library/book8.html Retrieved 14 July 2010.

[9] Gay Wilentz, "If you surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature" MELUS vol. 16. 1 (Spring 1989-1990): 21-32.

As such, these texts deconstruct the binary opposites that traditionally have populated the white literary and historical text. Orality and literacy do not function in these works of fiction as opposite cultural modalities, but as Genèvieve Fabre points out, as interdependent parts of a "tightly interwoven matrix of expression for a people who have nurtured a rich oral tradition and who at the same time have set literacy as a persistently sought ideal,"[10] thus becoming generative and transformative. After all, the writing and the narrating of history belongs not only to historians but also to artists and writers. As Gayatry Spivak points out, "history is storying."[11] In French and Spanish, for example, the word for history also means "story." The French and the Spanish words "historie" and "historia" respectively designate history as it is lived and experienced, the discipline through which it is approached and grasped, and the narrative that relates to it. Then, as Toni Morrison and Geneviève Fabre observe, the slave narratives, immersed in the autobiographical genre, are the first accounts of history by African Americans. History broken down in stories with particular, personal scenes and characters, that included the remembered accounts of eyewitnesses which blended with "interpretations, analyses, and historical judgments."[12] It is significant to point out here the fact that during the nineteenth century, blacks put all their efforts into "seizing" the word, to capture their rich, ancient oral tradition into the written text in order to demonstrate their intellectual abilities within the hostile atmosphere of Western ideology and civilization immersed in the peculiar institution of slavery. By becoming literate, blacks gained greater access to communication and ultimately to freedom and self-assertion. It is interesting to note that black writers from the 1980s on—almost two centuries later, are involved in a project that calls for reaffirming the roots of black folk culture in the United States, that is, oral literature and storytelling as a source of direction for recovering ancestral African roots, and as a sign of representation of cultural identity. Analyzing the ways in which storytelling and orality are used in these post-modern texts allows the investigation of the thematic and political connections that reinforce contemporary African American communities in their search for their

[10] Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally, eds. *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994), 9.
[11] Gayatri Spivak, "Bonding in Difference" in *An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands,* Alfred Arteaga, ed. (Durham: Duke UP, 1994), 283.
[12] Fabre and O'Meally, 6.

African cultural sources and in their understanding of their American identity.

The acts of re-memory contained in these fables of everyday life deeply affect the ways in which we readers of the twenty-first century understand history. By peeling off the inherited layers of official history, these writers are forcing us with their stories to look at history in a more realistic manner, discarding all the noxious labels and ideologies immersed in traditional historical accounts, and achieving the so long-denied authority to tell their own experiences as African American women. As Konstantinos Blatanis queries in his discussion of Susan Lori Park's plays *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*, in what way can one envision or anticipate a shift away from this space of loss, erasure and de-definition towards a terrain of historical wholeness? According to Blatanis, Parks, in her plays, dramatizes this erasure and invisibility by filling the gaps with her technique of "rep & rev," remembering and staging historical events aiming towards self-definition as vital for a set of characters who search in a "raggedy" family past.

Underlying this rhetorical strategy is the need for modern African American artists to redefine history, and redefine mythic history as well. A project that revives African Americans' collective history, ultimately heals the fragmented identities and psyches in the effort to achieve wholeness. Therefore, history is redefined and reconstructed within the frame of memory. The text emerges from a structure of memory, simultaneously sensual and visceral, and encourages the writer to reconstruct a logic of repetitive spiral complexity rather than a binary linear polarity. Through the project of spiritual reconstruction, the nature of the text is redefined, insisting on a theoretical articulation that recognizes the energy of the community formed by writer, reader, and text. As Karla Holloways suggests, there is an important and noticeable difference between an African thesis of mythologies as literature (the presence of myth in the text or story), and a Western thesis of mythology as an aspect of literature. Holloway encourages critics of African American literature to use this distinction as a point of genesis, in understanding the literary trajectories of black women's texts.[13]

As both Holloway and Denniston point out, the methodology of the black woman writer's text often dissolves the distinction between synchrony (simultaneity) and the long expanse of historic time and the changes that occur within this expanse (diachrony).[14] Thus, in the works of

[13] Karla F. C. Holloway, *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature* (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1992), 85-100.
[14] Ibid., 103; Dorothy Denniston, *The Fiction of Paule Marshall. Reconstructions*

African American women writers, time informs unity and gives an impulse towards wholeness because time, as perceived by these authors and by many African peoples and peoples of African descent, moves not in a linear fashion, but in a cyclic continuum, as John Mbiti explains, referring to the concept of time as understood in African philosophy and religion. [15]

African American women's novels, plays and poetry books published since the 1980s, and as reflected in the different chapters contained in this volume, undertake the exploration of the processes of memory, recovery, and representation of African American history by searching for a valid language to write and speak about their past, their present, and their future. These texts stand at the core of a writing project focused in the examination of the United States culture and history, one that takes account of the processes of internal colonization, which constitutes, as Michelle Wallace points out, "an important variation on postcolonial discourse." African Americans have been permanently exiled from their homeland, Africa, "which nowadays only exists most meaningfully in their imagination."[16] Therefore, African American women writers, aware of the displacement and fragmentation that afflict African American individuals, turn to re-elaborate and reconstitute the influence of their ancestral African cultures using the imagination to reconstruct the missing elements. As Denise Martin points out, in her essay entitled "African American Women Writers as Medicine Women," African American women writers have become modern *waganga* because with their writings they have the potential of healing the readers who are exposed to African concepts in familiar ways, claiming that the living memory of Africa serves as *n'kisi* medicine. Isabelle Van Peteghem-Tréad points out in her article, that "the artist is committed to re-writing history" claiming that historisation is a healing process which is essential for the building of any individual or collective identity.

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of History, Culture, and Gender (Knoxville: University of Tennesse Press, 1995), 19.

[15] John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1990).

[16] Michelle Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: from Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990), 2.

2. The Search for Spiritual Wholeness

> In any case, the question is not just the past or the present, but which factors out of both the past and the present represent for us the most dynamic forces for the future.
> —Ama Ata Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy*

Contemporary African American women writers assume the position of storytellers in an effort to develop a sense of the collective history that, as African Americans, they feel has been denied to people of African descent in the Western hemisphere. Each begins with the observation that the history of people of African descent in the United States and the African diaspora is fragmented and interrupted, and that history must be reconstructed in a way to be a resource for the present. Thus, the argument of wholeness is conceived and developed as a strategic point in the work of African American women writers. Spiritual wholeness for African Americans consists of an understanding and embracing of the African American past that interacts with the present in order to give sustenance for living and for understanding the present and the future. This idea is tightly linked to the concept of Ancestral Spiritualism. It is usually the influence that the figures of the ancestors has on the characters, and through their memory containing the whole African tradition, that the ancestral spiritualism is evoked in these works. Ancestral spiritualism transforms the materialistic North American setting into a place of meaningful connection to African Americans with ancestral Africa, thus revealing to the African American individual a sense of belonging to a spiritual homeland. As Paule Marshall points out,

> a spiritual return to Africa is absolutely necessary for the reintegration of that which was lost in our collective historical past and the many national pasts which comprise it.[17]

She emphasizes the role that Africa plays in determining African American historical identity, an aspect of their personality that she feels has been "systematically de-emphasized." Therefore, Marshall points out that it is the task of African Americans, as people of African descent, to "reinvent" their own image, a process in which the role of Africa is essential.

[17] John Williams, "Return of a Native Daughter: an Interview with Paule Marshall and Maryse Condé" in *Sage*, 3 (Fall 1986): 52-53.

This study follows the trajectories of contemporary African American women's narrative structures and the development of themes and characters which delineate the movement and growth towards spiritual wholeness. The articles contained in this volume approach these texts as being part of what Vévé Clark calls "Diaspora literacy," from an Afrocentric perspective as an alternative interpretative mode for literary analysis.[18] Vévé Clark uses the term Diaspora Literacy to refer to "the reader's ability to comprehend the literatures of Africa, Afro-America and the Caribbean from an informed, indigeneous perspective."[19] Vévé Clark urges readers of African American literature to think beyond linear Hegelian dualities which poses the world into eternal irreconciliable positive and negative axioms, in order to cope with the complexities, the differences, the borders, the fragmentation, the multiplicities inherent in the realities and shared experiences of the African Diaspora. To comprehend the sphere of the African Diaspora, one needs to reclaim the cultural differences and to redefine unity in transnational terms. In order to do this, we need to acknowledge and to understand the dynamics of wholeness, or rather the search for it, as a theoretical tool to read African American texts. The search for wholeness stands as a key theoretical concept for African American literature and culture, together with double-consciousness, re-memory, and ancestral spiritualism.[20] Re-memory and ancestral spiritualism are two intimately related concepts. Ancestral spiritualism consists of the connection among past, present and future, and the life force that makes it possible for the physical and the spiritual worlds to be one.[21] As the

[18] Clark joins previous African American scholars such as Houston A. Baker and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in order to offer an alternative critical theory to read African American texts which takes into account the vernacular and the afrocentric perspectives rooted in the African Diaspora. Vévé Clark, "Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness" in Hortense S. Spillers, ed. *Comparative American Identities. Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 40-61.

[19] Vévé Clark, "Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness" 42.

[20] Johnnella E. Butler develops this idea in her essay "African American Literature and Realist Theory: Seeking the 'true-true'" where she states that "rememory and double consciousness hold the key to understanding the dynamics of wholeness" in Satya Mohanty et al., eds. *Identity Politics Reconsidered* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 171.

[21] Silvia Castro-Borrego develops this concept in her article "The Search for Wholeness in the Construction of Diasporic Identities in Contemporary African American Women's Literature" in *The Dialectic of Diasporas: Memory, Location and Gender*, eds., Mar Gallego and Isabel Soto (Valencia: Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans, 2009), 53-72.

concept of re-memory connects with the past through the ancestor figure, they both establish a vital link with myth since the ancestors are "timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom."[22] They function as bridges between history and myth because they join present experiences with those of the past, affirming cultural continuity and "instructing new generations in survival techniques"[23] which are vital for the achievement of wholeness and for spiritual and moral growth. Ancestors, according to African views, are a "collective repository of wisdom rather than a group of heroic individuals." They provide guidance and inspiration because they establish moral and ethical standards.[24]

Thabiti Lewis in his chapter "Negotiating Spiritual Wholeness and Feminism in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara" uses the term spiritual wholeness to describe Bambara's narrative strategies and aesthetics because her fiction functions like a spiritual conversion as it unearths hidden histories and continuities in African and Black cultural production without limiting itself to notions of gender or cultural purity. Lewis further contends that Bambara's fiction is about recovery: of women, family, community, and spirituality, stressing balance and aiming for collective and personal transformation.

The search for wholeness links historically to the search for freedom and agency by African slaves during the 18th and 19th centuries, and later on, during the 20th and 21th centuries in the processes of colonization and neocolonization, which expanded from Africa to the different nations affected by them. Africa, for the millions of human beings entering the African diaspora, became the source.[25]

The search for wholeness goes beyond the dialectic binaries implied by double consciousness and moves forward in its commitment with multiplicity in the relationship between the African self and the Western other. The

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[22] Toni Morrison "Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation" in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation." Mari Evans,* ed. (Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1984), 343.

[23] Joyce Pettis, *Toward Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1995), 117.

[24] Tim Woods, *African Pasts. Memory and history in African literatures* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007), 190.

[25] As Marysé Conde explains, (cited in Clark), Africa "is the source, but we believed that we would find a home there, when it was not a home." Africa as a "Welcome House" is just a metaphor for the mythical Africa invented by Negritude writers, according to Clark in "Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness" 49.

search for wholeness functions as a venue where re-memory, as conceived originally by Toni Morrison, functions as a link to a past which is understood as powerful and useful once we are ready to confront it and to accept it through the wise guidance of ancestry. The search for wholeness is informed by the principle of polarity, which dictates that the different parts of a whole complement each other, once we approach them with the right frame of mind. Clark insits on the importance that we develop not only Diaspora literacy, but also Marasa consciousness. Marasa consciousness invites us to observe, with the help of the imagination, beyond the binary, in order to look for movement and change pointing out towards the transformation of cultural oppositions which may occur on several levels of experience whenever "false notions of stability" are created.[26] In her chapter in this volume entitled "Quilting Scriptural Knots: Lucille Clifton's Revisionary Rewriting," Carme Manuel discusses how Clifton uses her poetic voice endowed with a sense of sacralized agency which confirms and claims black women's contributions to the heritage of spirituality based on a belief in sacred, spiritual and supernatural agency in order to achieve historical justice through the principle of inclusion: the both/and mentality, rather than the either/or attitude.

According to Janheinz Jahn, African philosophy is the philosophy of unity of all things, of ontological harmony and coherence in the world. Therefore, in traditional African culture, life and death, secular and sacred, night and day, black and white, ugliness and beauty are not antagonistic polarities, but are all constant and continuing forces. According to the Magara Principle, it is through Nommo, the power of the Word, that the human being becomes a Muntu: a being endowed with spirituality, that is, with intelligence and soul. Nommo then, becomes the concrete entity through which the abstract Magara principle is realized.[27] The Magara Principle or spiritual life, refers then to a person's well-being and happiness connecting thus the living man and woman with their ancestors, since Muntu includes living men and women and the dead, and also the gods, becoming an active force which causes and maintains all movements of things. Through the Magara Principle the living and the dead are close kin, who can mutually strengthen one another. Magara, just as wholeness is a

[26] As Clark points out, African, Afro-american and "Caribbean cultures and literatures when analyzed within the context of binary oppositions remind us that movement rather than false notions of stability are mandated if, indeed, stability signifies domination by a minority (whether old planters, bèkès, or military dictators." In "Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness," 45.

[27] Jahnheinz Jahn, *African Culture and the Western World* (Grove Press, 1994), 127.

kind of spiritual energy that the living person can have, receive, or loose, but cannot be: it is not a constant. This is why we refer to the concept of wholeness on the one hand as a restorative transformative energy, and, on the other, as a process which needs to be searched for by the individual as reflected in his or her connection with the community, and which works against fragmentation because it is integrated in a set of principles "which cohere into an archetypal pattern informing and influencing black African culture."[28]

According to Joyce Pettis, several words describe the healed, post-fractured state: "spiritual wholeness, regeneration, reintegration, and reclamation. All of these terms refer to the restoration of wholeness, which means that the spirit is gathered up, healed, and revealed unto itself."[29] The term spirituality is used in its West African cultural sense as Pettis suggests, "as an embodiment of dynamic energy, separate from the physical body but essential to its well-being both physically and emotionally."[30] As Joyce Pettis further contends, spirituality is acknowledged by psychologists and others who study traditional African culture. The term spirituality encompases, as Carme Manuel points out in her chapter, an individual's inner feelings, together with his or her own experiences and their religious attitudes, not requiring belief in God nor adherence to any institutional forms of worship. In the case of African American women writers and artists, it includes their sensibility towards creativity and artistic self-expression rooted in agency and a certain degree of wholeness. The influence of African thought, philosophy, and world views is great in contemporary African American women's writings, suggesting a distinct interpretive tool that is rooted in African American cultural history. Therefore, African American mythmaking, and a discussion of the nature and functions of myth in African American thought, as Molefi Asante suggests, is:

> a way to discover the values of a spiritual, traditional, even mystical rhetoric as it confronts a technological, linear world and to provide us with ideas for an Afrocentric alternative to apocalyptic thinking.[31]

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[28] John Benoit, "Archetypal patterns underlying Traditional African Cultures" in *Contributions in Black Studies,* vol. 4 (1980): art. 5, 35-42.
[29] Joyce Pettis, *Toward Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction* (Charlottesville: U.P. of Virginia, 1995), 4.
[30] Ibid., 4-5.
[31] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea,* 97-98.

A consideration of important concepts in African religion and philosophy such as those of time, and African American mythmaking with it implications in the development of a literary history rooted in orality, may help to explain beliefs, attitudes, practices, and general ways of life of the people of African descent not only in a traditional set up but also in the modern situation, as reflected in the literary expressions of contemporary African Americans. The articles included in this collection retrieve a female knowledge inherent to an oral tradition which functions as Woods points out "as a signifier of a past that has been censored by the rupturing cultural effects of colonial modernity and is now part of a process of postcolonial 'working-through.'"[32] Within this context, African American women writings join their African counterparts in a creative process through which re-memory linked to oral narrative becomes a transformative activity which transcends the mere representation of gender power relations. In order to enter into the dynamics of the transformative power of wholeness both women and men must obtain a certain degree of individual agency, to become self-enabled, not only surviving trauma but also healing themselves. The ultimate objective of wholeness is the participation in communal relationships and to gain, as Joyce Pettis points out, "an essential identity grounded in cultural knowledge."[33] For as Brent Henze suggests, individual agency facilitates the process of the formation of a true collectivity, because it enables a dialogical process of development which truly works for the benefit of one's self and one's community.[34]

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[32] Tim Woods, *African Pasts. Memory and history in African literatures*, 55.

[33] Joyce Pettis, *Towards Wholeness in Paule Marshall's* Fiction (Charlottesville: U. Press of Virginia, 1995), 147.

[34] Brent R. Henze, "Who says Who says? The Epistemological Grounds for Agency in Liberatory Political Projects" in *Reclaiming Identity. Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism.* Paula Moya and Michael Hames-García eds. (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 2000), 238.

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PART I:

THE HEALING NARRATIVES OF BLACK WOMEN WRITERS

CHAPTER ONE

WOMANISM, SEXUAL HEALING AND THE SUTURE OF ECO-SPIRITUALITY IN ALICE WALKER'S NOVELS: FROM *MERIDIAN* TO *NOW IS THE TIME TO OPEN YOUR HEART*

ISABELLE VAN-PETEGHEM TRÉARD

> My mother's grandmother, Tallulah (basket maker) Calloway, was part Cherokee by blood, and of necessity Cherokee by culture. She was also part African. […] My mother was also Irish/English, in addition to African, and resembled Wilma! Her father's father was English, a Grant.[…][1]
> —Alice Walker

1. Introduction

Alice Walker is identified as an African-American writer, the hyphen between the two identities forming both a divide and a suture in her works. This problematic representation of the self is evoked in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) when Tashi, the African, accuses Olivia of not being black anymore as her colour is fading while the novel explores the difficult reconciliation of the two worlds: "Yes, puzzling and endlessly fascinating! The richness of nature of life. The ways human beings can mix and remain human and complex, full of colors and attitudes!"[2]

The stress on the spirituality and "Africanity" of customs inherited from African and Native cultural roots can be analysed as a means for the characters to fight alienation, and a cure to heal a psyche fragmented by the Middle Passage and then by the post-modern condition. As slavery forced the Africans to uproot their religion from its geographic setting

[1] Alice Walker, e-mail message to Isabelle Van Peteghem-Tréard, April 18, 2004.
[2] Ibid.

while being compelled to live under the white man's rhythms and rule, a mosaic-shaped syncretism, to use Bastide's term, was born. Alice Walker's characters become resilient, healthy and whole once they acknowledge their ancestors' voices. Her monism eventually expresses itself in this syncretism which allows the heroines to weave some identity quilt out of bits and pieces, to stitch back some material that would fit everyone, like Celie's trousers. The artist is committed to re-writing history from the woman's point of view and art becomes the way for the characters to find a voice and achieve resilience.

The act of writing and the position of the artist grant women an extravagant power, that of creating, through the reclaiming of the symbolic order. Alice Walker's womanism or purple "feminitude" are the expressions of the empowerment of the black female subject with the characters of *The Color Purple* (1983) or *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998) who break free from the patriarchal order and reach wholeness and sexual healing.

Alice Walker re-writes and re-interprets a cosmogonic ritual to transform the forbidden and unknown territory of joy or "jouissance" into an *imago mundi* to which the characters and the readers can eventually return, once they have embarked upon some initiatory journey. Her fiction builds an altar to celebrate Mother Earth, debunking the patriarchal system, and presents a mystical and oneiric universe of which woman is the centre. The artist makes the transcending world of heroes, Gods and ancestors available as she abolishes profane time and retrieves the sacred temporality of myth. Pamela A. Smith explained that Eros, activism and pantheism merge in Alice Walker's fiction to found her *ecospirituality*, "a womanist spirituality which proposes what might be called not a realized but a *realizable* eschatology."[3] *Ecospirituality* based upon some mystical naturalism (the Grandmother Earth of *Now Is the Time To Open Your Heart* (2004), or the metempsychosis of Lissie in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989)) leads to the articulation of healing: some ancient snake uncoils in the utopian space of "Walkerian" fiction.

[3] Pamela A. Smith, *Green Lap, Brown Embrace, Blue Body: The Ecospirituality Of Alice Walker*, http://www.crosscurrents.org/smith2.htm, accessed December 12, 2009.