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African Spirituality in Literature Written by Women of African Descent

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African Spirituality in Literature Written by Women of African Descent

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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College of Arts and Sciences
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DEDICATION

Unconditional love always to the beautiful souls who have paved the way for me, stood beside me, supported me, and encouraged me.

To my mom and Abuela. Because of them, I soar.

To my brother. Because of him, I believe.

To my family. Because of them, I am.

To my friends. Because of them, I can.

To my husband. Because of him, we are one.

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ABSTRACT

African spiritual memory is the thread that connects members of the African diaspora, irrespective where we are or what we are doing. However, because of white supremacy, the longevity of African spiritual memory and its duration as a living, thriving, breathing force often becomes distorted under the weight of anti-black prejudice. This dissertation debunks the myth that people of African descent required outside input from non-Africans and Arabs to establish the world's oldest and most studied civilizations, Ta-Seti and then the Egyptian Empire. Women writers of African descent capture the ever-present thread of African spiritual memory, providing a glimpse of how African cosmology functions as the founding epistemology upon which Ancient Egyptian civilizations were built. In addition, women writers of African descent capture the empowering essence of African spiritual memory as a mode of resistance to intersectional oppression, and the all-inclusive healing power African cosmology offers in response to dominant discourses. To trace the longevity of African spiritual memory within the works of African diasporic women, this dissertation explores Ancient Egyptian Literature written by Queen Hatshepsut and Queen Makeda; traditional precolonial African song performed by Kgatla women; and two contemporary post-colonial novels, one written by Edwidge Danticat and the other by Toni Morrison. From an African-centered perspective, these texts reveal that people, especially women, of African descent have a founding role in shaping civilizations, and an even longer history of tapping into African spiritual memory as an empowering and healing force.

INTRODUCTION: AFRICAN COSMOLOGY & SPIRITUALITY IN AFRICAN DIASPORIC WOMEN’S LITERATURE

Among the Akan tribe in Ghana, the *Sankofa* symbol – a bird flying with its head turned as it reaches towards a golden egg resting on its back – represents the importance of history in the African worldview (see fig. 1). *Sankofa* is expressed in the Akan language as “*se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki*,” which literally means “it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot” (Kwartang 60). Translated from Twi to English, *San* means go, *ko* means back, and *ka* means fetch: go back and fetch it. Although Sankofa has many interpretations, it ultimately symbolizes that the Akan people’s search for knowledge is based on critical reasoning, as well as intelligent and patient investigation of the past (Kwartang 61).



Figure 1: Philip Owusu, *Sankofa (abstracted Adinkra forms)*, Sankofa Symbol of the Akan Tribe, 2019

The Akan people understand that the past serves as a guide for understanding the past and planning for the future. As an African American woman, I too value this wisdom. The purpose of

this dissertation, thus, is three-fold: foremost, my focus is to situate myself within African discourses and epistemology, but not as a distant observer with a remote gaze. These pages are an acknowledgement of my heritage as a distant daughter overcoming a stolen legacy who will not rest until she has gone back to find herself therein.

A second endeavor, thus, is exploration. In many cases, African history has been hijacked: European settlers, colonizers and new-age liberals narrate our histories, intentionally failing to capture the complex humanity of African people and the global legacies the African diaspora has inspired and continues to create. I aim to continue my journey as a life-long learner who embraces the richness of African thoughts and practices. I am interested in knowing how women of African descent interpolate spirituality. Thus, this dissertation seeks to decolonize usurper discourses by revealing how African thought and praxis manifest within the African diaspora.

The most important reason for discussing African systems of knowledge as they connect to the African diaspora and beyond, is to bring Black women's voices to the fore. Just as African epistemologies have been pushed to the margins in many institutions, so have Black women's experiences. Many African American women attest to being silenced. In the Introduction of *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women*, Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, et al. acknowledge this fact:

Historical scholarship on Black women especially has yet to map the broad contours of their political and social thought in any detail, or to examine their distinctive intellectual tradition as often self-educated thinkers with a sustained history of wrestling with both sexism and racism. (1)

Not only have our roles as women been ignored in Western academia, but the trend has long persisted even among Black scholars. In an effort to continue the activism set forth by so many women of African descent, this dissertation highlights the integral role women of African descent play in their respective communities, which I explore through the literature of African diasporic women.

Essentially, my dissertation applies an African-centered perspective to multiple genres of literature authored by Black women; it engages pre-colonial, modern and contemporary writings in order to show the continuity and endurance of African cosmology. A fundamental belief – and one that resonates within my own conceptualizations – is the wisdom that all things are connected, especially time. I would like to continue valuing this perspective here: an underlying argument inherent in my dissertation is that ancient African and indigenous cosmology has a lingering presence in African communities, and that aspects of these epistemologies appear in African diasporic women’s oral traditions and writings.

For this reason, I open my dissertation with the analysis of “I am your betrothed,” a traditional African poem performed by a Kgatla woman; two ancient African texts written by Queen Hatshepsut, the Queen of Egypt and Makeda, the Queen of Sheba. Finally, I include two post-colonial novels, *A Mercy*, by Toni Morrison and *Breath Eyes Memory*, by Edwidge Danticat. I include these works because they maintain connections to African spiritual memory while also participating in African literary traditions. These texts are also representative of African values that dictated political, religious, and personal spheres. Most importantly, they do what very little scholarship in the West does: they highlight African women’s agency as political and cultural leaders. In the article, “Not a Trophy Wife,” Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers argues that “African women were not merely acted upon by men, but rather, they were actors or agents

in their communities and worked with men to keep harmony and balance” (651). As agents, ancient African women played integral roles in the governance of their societies: many were warriors, queens and daughters who built entire cities, enacted policies, and selected divine rulers.

I argue akin to Alameen-Shavers that ancient African women were and continue to be the crux of African culture and knowledge systems. Using ancient African and indigenous women writings as frameworks for exploration, my dissertation will also review modern and contemporary works written by African diasporic women writers. I use these books to demonstrate how white supremacy, colonization, and subsequent discourses of domination rupture African spiritual memory and the lingering implications of these fractures. The aim here is to unveil how Black women writers have retained their linkages to ancient African and ancestral wisdoms in the pages of their work.

My dissertation begins with African oral traditions because they encapsulate fundamental concepts to the African worldview. I do not hope to minimize this worldview by suggesting that it does not house many ways of knowing. I seek to show the continuity of indigenous African belief systems as they moved into ancient African civilizations, and then into modern and contemporary interpretations. I want to make it clear that African oral culture comprises more than that which is said; it also entails music, dance, gestures, and play among African civilizations. “Dance, story-telling and religious practices are all grounded on the music and dance of African societies. They are seen as a very important aspect in communication and entertainment in most cultures as well as a natural teaching tool” (Theresa Tuwour 101). I use African Proverbs, myths and folklore in this section to illustrate the cosmological nuances

embedded within the African worldview, and how these beliefs transpired to the actual lived existences of African people.

The next section illustrates how ancient African civilizations maintained their indigenous heritage even as their civilizations expanded. In this chapter, I will use the writings of Ancient and pre-colonial African women to explore how these women retained their rootedness to their ancestors' wisdom. To do this, I trace the themes, values and teachings inherent in African cosmology and African oral traditions for their lingering footprints in the writing of ancient African Queens, such as Queen Hatshepsut and Queen/King Makeda. The next section builds upon the fact that AIKS have a longer and more enduring presence in the Afro-diaspora than has currently been shown. This section also acknowledges that AIKS is very understudied and distorted by European colonization. The modern and contemporary Afro-women authored texts I engage speak to both of these truths: on the one hand, I use these more recent writings to illustrate the devastation Black chattel slavery wrought upon Africans. On the other hand, I use these texts to point to the subtle and overt transference of indigenous wisdom these Black women authors pull from and incorporate in their works. I will conclude that African cosmology exist in a continuum, and that it has an undeniable permanent presence in writings by Black women.

In chapter one, "Spirituality in Traditional African Women's Writings," I focus on African orality as an expression of spirituality, specifically as certain precolonial African women used it to resist intersecting aggressions within their respective tribes. I provide an analysis of the traditional African poem, "I am your betrothed" because it captures several key aspects of indigenous African women as spiritual beings, yet burdened by embedded gender expectations that place them at the mercy of patriarchal standards. Not only does this chapter provide an

understanding of AIKS as a spiritual, cosmological framework, but it also provides a closer analysis of women's role as gendered subjects in their communities.

In chapter two "The Antiquity of Black Thought: Maat in Ancient African Women's Writings," I analyze how Ancient African Queens interpolate principles of Maat as a source of empowerment during their rule. During this exploration, I provide a historical overview of Maat not only to emphasize the longevity of African epistemology, but also to highlight its origins among nomadic Black Africans in sub-Saharan Africa. Over the centuries, *Maat* became the organizing philosophy by which ancient Egyptian kings and queens ruled their empires. To highlight the longevity of African epistemology and to illustrate this philosophy as a guiding principle among ancient African queens, I align my research with the Cheikh Anta Diop, who established the connection between pre-dynastic, precolonial Africa and Egyptian civilization via linguistic similarities, archaeological findings, and historical evidence. Diop argues that ancient Egypt was an African civilization, and more importantly, that African diasporic liberation begins with this acknowledgement of a pre-colonial and very rich Black historical past.

I also extend John S. Mbiti's concept of African Cosmology, wherein African people view the universe as one, connected whole. In this worldview, god encompasses all things endowing them with life, whether inanimate or animate, visible or hidden, physical, or spiritual. In his groundbreaking book, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Mbiti emphasizes several key aspects of African cosmology that I also find in the literature of Queen Makeda and Queen Hatshepsut. One aspect in particular is the African concept of god, not as a being far removed from the human experience, but one that is intimately connected with, and reflected through all life forms. Mbiti asserts that "natural phenomena and objects are intimately associated with God. They not only originate from god, but also bear witness to god. [Humans] understanding of god

is strongly coloured by the universe of which [humans are themselves] a part” (62). Nomadic and precolonial African people associate god with life itself, and, as all aspects of life intertwine in a delicate balance to maintain life, they likewise define their existence according to these principles: humans, as divine extensions of god, must maintain the harmony and balance of the universe, for in so doing, they preserve the regenerative properties of the universe, and by proxy, life itself.

My interpretation of Queen Makeda and Queen Hatshepsut’s speeches are based on Maulana Karenga’s research on Maatian philosophy / Kemetic Ethics as a moral code. In his comprehensive book, *Maat, the Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics*, Karenga asserts that Egyptians not only ruled their empires through this moral code, but also, that this code’s founding principles stem from African cosmology, which he reveals through a cross-comparative analysis of Maatian /Kemetic Ethics and various African creation myths. I follow this analytical method as I explore how Queen Makeda and Queen Hatshepsut embody these ideals as powerful, longstanding female rulers. Finally, I explore the African concept of *Ubuntu among various African communities, which demonstrates that it is an extension of African Indigenous Knowledge, alongside Maatian / Kemetic ethics.*

In chapter three, “They Thought They Could Bury Us, But They Didn’t Know We Were Seeds,” I provide an ecowomanist interpretation of Toni Morrison’s novel, *A Mercy*. The most defining aspect of ecowomanist theory is the parallel African women writers emphasize between white supremacy and abuse. A core principle of ecowomanism is that women of African descent have suffered alongside and with the Earth and as such, have been vocal leaders of resistance to these abuses. Melanie L. Harris, author of “Ecowomanism: An Introduction,” corroborates this observation, stating that ecowomanist writers highlight “the necessity for race-class-gender

intersectional analysis when examining the logic of domination, and unjust public policies that result in environmental health disparities that historically disadvantage communities of color” (Harris 6). In short, it is an approach that links the voices of African diasporan women to environmental awareness. Harris observes that in the same way systems of domination oppress women of color across multiple axis – race, class, gender, sex, ableism, etcetera – so too have “androcentric attitudes devalued the earth by privileging humans over the wellbeing of the Earth” (6).

In *Black on Earth*, Kimberly N. Ruffin coins the term *ecological burden and beauty* to conceptualize the ways racism has barred / bars African Americans from participating in discussions of and about nature (1). She addresses how scientific racism continues to thwart African Americans from ecological discourses by relegating their statuses to apes, monkeys and orangutans. She further establishes how these non-human categorizations continue to dominate Western / European scholarship. She asserts that European/Western white modes of thinking about the environment and nature often pass as inclusive but are better understood to be “. . . white racially gerrymandered concern[s] which reach out to include plants and animals while continuing to exclude Black and colored peoples” (5). Her introduction clearly addresses looming ramifications of such racial alienation; for instance, she points out that the exclusion of African American / African connectedness to the earth and nature ignore African spirituality, verbal art and oral history. Similarly, such oversight ignores the role of institutional racism in the creation of non-living structures (i.e., ghettos, plantations, prisons, dams, oil mines, poor infrastructures) and land appropriation on African American / Black communities’ health.

In chapter four, “Sickness, Healing, and Self-Recovery in African Diasporic Women’s Literature,” I investigate the role of African spirituality in Edwidge Danticat’s novel, *Breath*,

Eyes, Memory. I utilized the Kongo cosmogram as a theoretical framework from which to interpret her characterization of the Caco women. Based on Fu-Kiau's very thorough and credible description of the Kongo cosmogram, I assert that Danticat performs her own, very unique rite of passage for her female characters. I also incorporated bell hooks work, *Sister of the Yam*, to understand how women achieve self-recovery in response to intersecting oppressions. Finally, I consider Marimba Ani's theoretical framework, *Maat, Sankofa, Maat*, to understand concepts of how African people conceptualize sickness, wellness, and healing, particularly as a social practice among women of African descent.

Ultimately, each writer highlights core concepts of African spirituality and the various ways women of African descent tap into this spiritual lore as way of life. This dissertation demonstrates that spirituality is a source of life for African/African descendant women: it is the means by which women define their existence, a form of resistance, particularly as they navigate intersecting oppressions, and most importantly, an endless source of rejuvenation so long as they remain connected to the Well. The goal of this work is to highlight African/Black women's voices, not merely as colonial subjects, but as powerful leaders, intellectuals, and pillars of their communities irrespective the time period or their geographical location.

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CHAPTER ONE: AFRICAN COSMOLOGY AND PRE-COLONIAL WOMANHOOD IN “I AM YOUR BETROTHED”

To grasp the pivotal role precolonial African women played in their communities, understanding how African people perceive the world and their place in it is essential. First, most precolonial African societies believe the universe is organic. From this standpoint, all things have a soul or life, even inanimate things, like rocks. Because all things are thought to be endowed with spirit, life in all its diverse forms, is sacred. Marimba Ani, author of *Yurugu*, adequately articulates this belief:

The African worldview, and the worldviews of other people who are not of European origin, all appear to have certain themes in common. The universe to which they relate is sacred in origin, is organic, and is a true “cosmos.” Human beings are part of the cosmos, and as such, relate intimately with other cosmic beings. Knowledge of the universe comes through relationship with it and through perception of spirit in matter. The universe is one: spheres are joined because of a single unifying force that pervades all being. Meaningful reality issues from this force. (29)

Ani highlights another aspect of African cosmology: because the universe is ‘one,’ all life forms are inextricably intertwined. K.K Bunseki Kimbwandende Fu-Kiau, the world’s leading indigenous African scholar and native, corroborates this fact, stating, “. . .nothing exists that does not follow the steps of the cyclical . . . cosmogram. People, animals, inventions, social systems, and so on are conceived . . . and live through a kind of pregnancy” (qtd. by Oḃádélé Kambon 3).

Even though Fu-Kiau references this worldview as a feature of his indigenous tribe, the Bakongo, this cosmological understanding of time is a prominent feature among most African Diasporic communities.

This belief system, wherein all things exist in one unified whole, “determines the beliefs and practices of the relationships between humans (the ancestors, the living, and the unborn), nature (as a living entity with spirit and soul), and the Deities (Ajayi 45). Within the African worldview, there is a hierarchy: god, deities, ancestors, people still alive, animals, and then plants. However, despite this hierarchal nature, all forms of life are essential: none is greater than or lesser than the other – there are only different functions that maintain the balance, harmony, and rhythm of the universe. In this manner, both the metaphysical and physical are critical for the continuation of life. In African cosmology, the spiritual world is the priority because it is considered the ultimate form of existence for humankind. As the spiritual world is considered divine, and humans are a part of this all-encompassing cosmos, humans are capable of becoming divine. Therefore, indigenous African people have a history of modelling their daily lives according to these interdependent rhythms of the universe. Individual participation is necessary for community survival, and thus, “balance in the community, as in the universe, consists of maintaining interdependent relationships” (Ajayi 45).

Both Ani and Fu-Kiau highlight the communal nature of African people, and more importantly, that shared space is sacred, specifically because it ensures community wellness. In “The African Indigenous Lens,” Chioma Ohajunwa and Gubela Mji corroborate this observation, stating that “this notion of a shared space is centered within spirituality. The spiritual permeates the very flow of the community and is embedded in structures, practices and the daily life of each member of the community” (2524). As everything exists in one unified pregnancy, it is

inconceivable that what happens in one stage will not necessarily impact the others. Thus, African cosmology is cyclic, or circular. Unlike Western epistemology, there is nothing linear about one's existence. For African people, life requires an ebb and flow where every part of the universe is in conversation with the rest. Even though African tribes exhibit this founding principle in different ways, as a collective, African people have always prioritized the wellbeing of their community over the individual specifically because of the common belief that if the community is well, then so too shall be the individual.

Although all components are equally important in sustaining life, balance and harmony in the universe, traditional African belief systems adhered to a hierarchal order with cyclic stages by which events occur. Sulyman Niang explains that,

African man sees the universe as a hierarchy of vital forces, and man is that force which links the inanimate objects to the world of spiritual forces above him. This aspect of the traditional African conception of man makes man both a manipulator of spiritual power and a target of such power. (3)

This vitalist component of African cosmology certainly plays a role in the way indigenous African people perceive order, especially in divine thought and in everyday lived experiences. Because the spiritual world takes precedence over all else, early African people strove to live their everyday lives in alignment with the divine order so as to maintain harmony and balance in the universe. Indigenous African societies honor their duties to the spiritual realm through their individual contributions to their larger communities as a whole. As most African societies were patrilineal and patriarchal, yet still revered women as divine figures, men ascribed fertility, life, and fecundity to women's physical being.

What I find the most unusual about indigeneity studies is how African people have been overlooked for so long. The holistic nature of African cosmology, as seen in early African civilizations, among indigenous African communities, and within the African diaspora today, is similar to the criteria indigeneity scholars reserve for Native Americans. For example, in consideration of Aboriginal scholar Marie Battiste's definition, alongside those of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems scholars, the similarities between the two bodies of knowledge share many similarities despite mainstream attempts to elongate Black people from our sense of rootedness. Battiste's criteria is as follows:

- (1) knowledge of and belief in unseen powers in the ecosystem;
- (2) knowledge that all things in the ecosystem are dependent on each other;
- (3) knowledge that reality is structured according to most of the linguistic concepts by which Indigenous describe it;
- (4) knowledge that personal relationships reinforce the bond between persons, communities, and ecosystems;
- (5) knowledge that sacred traditions and persons who know these traditions are responsible for teaching —morals and —ethics to practitioners who are then given responsibility for this specialized knowledge and its dissemination; and
- (6) knowledge that an extended kinship passes on teachings and social practices from generation to generation. (42)

Apparently, holism, interdependence, language, shared space, and community are critical aspects of what Battiste defines as Native American indigeneity. While she is not amiss in recognizing these components, she does limit them to Native Americans despite their first presence among precolonial African civilizations.

In “Expressions of Indigenous and Local Knowledge,” Akinloye Ojo, Mobolanle Sotunsa and Karim Traore, however, demonstrates that these criteria have always been a significant part of the African worldview, too:

For African people, indigenous knowledge refers to what local people know and do, and what they have known and done for generations—practices that developed through trial and error and proved flexible enough to cope with change. The ability to use community knowledge so produced ... forms important literacy skills that are critical to the survival of indigenous peoples. (3)

Based on Ojo et al., Native Americans and Africans have much more in common than European scholarship permits. Their reference to oral history further elucidates the fact that African people arguably have the longest history of ‘indigeneity’ in the world. The centrality of language, or African orality, solidifies this fact.

In *African Traditional Oral Cultures*, Lewis Asimeng Boahene demonstrates that African orality functioned as a living, thriving library for African people. He states that African indigeneity is “knowledge transmitted orally from generation to generation through innovative practices that tend to take the form of stories, songs, proverbs, riddles, folklore, cultural beliefs and values” (“Sankofa” 7). Song, dance, performance, riddles, poems, and drumming are all modes of African orality. These African modes of orality enabled and empowered social, political, and spiritual existence; for many European scholars, orality has been misconstrued as the absence of literacy, but a closer exploration indicates that this is not the case. For African people past and present, orality is self-constitutive. It is the way African people assert their humanity and re-fashion it all at once. It is not only the way people of African descent exist, but how they express themselves, how they create meaning, and how they create space to flourish no

matter where they are, or the conditions they live in. It thrives within the corpus of the African diaspora, and thus, is both spiritual, practical, and contextual. Indigenous knowledge is all together broad, complex, and nuanced. It challenges ‘identity politics’ in many ways, for scholars are always questioning what it means as an academic category, who classifies as indigenous, and how valid these claims are. Despite Eurocentric thinkers’ attempts to universalize, categorize – and thereby ‘own’ – an understanding of indigenous knowledge, there will never be a ‘one size fits all’ definition, nor a monolithic identity by which all indigenous communities identify.

Because AIKS does not exist in a vacuum, it also includes the impact of and responses to intersecting oppressions, such as colonization, race, gender, class, and sex. George J. Sefa Dei, extensively outlines these aspects in “Indigenous Knowledge Studies:”

1) Land, history, culture and identity are powerful explanatory factors for socio-political encounters; 2) land and spiritual identity are sites of asymmetrical power; 3) land and spirituality are key aspects, but these aspects should not lead to reductionist thinking; 4) African indigeneity is anti-colonial: that is, African indigenous knowledge rejects Western hegemony. The goal is to re-gain spiritual power and strength. 5) AIK is about resistance to the status quo, European imperialism, and institutionalized racism. 6) Finally, AIK highlights spirituality and spiritual ontology (11).

I would like to extend Dei’s criteria to include three aspects that are unique to African indigenous communities, and by extension, the African diaspora: creativity, shared experiential wisdom, and ancestral memory. These three criteria are embedded within African oral culture, yet most scholarship rarely discusses these characteristics as aspects of African indigeneity, and by proxy, excludes how these practices connect women of African descent / the African

Diaspora to indigeneity studies. Starting African history with slavery not only elongates people of African descent from their indigenous, ancestral ties, but evidently, it also warps the way scholars discuss the entire field.

Finally, the most critical topic indigenous studies tend to ignore is the central role women play in their communities, not just as socio-political leaders, but also in oral history. This observation is especially true for Indigenous African women. In “Women’s Oral genres,” Mary E. Modupe Kolawole asserts that “contrary to some existing myths and theories, creativity in traditional African settings is not an exclusively male affair. Many genres are women’s genres, but in certain places this is undermined or subverted” (92). There are various reasons for this: while most scholars agree that this erasure stems from patriarchy, some argue that it stems from traditional African male-dominated values while others argue that it stems from colonialism. Additionally, some scholars argue that men stole these verbal arts from women and then appropriated them as a way to assert their dominance. In *Womanism and African Consciousness*, Ode Ogede corroborates that in many Nigerian Yoruba groups, “the oral forms with which some Igede male artists are now associated were in fact invented by women,” but now women have been prohibited from participating in these religious and social cultural practices (73). Despite numerous attempts to silence African women, many of their voices remain audible and visible in traditional poems and songs that are still sung, performed, or recorded by native African historians.

What these oral literatures unveil, contrary to myths, is that indigenous African women are sources of knowledge and creativity. As artists and historians, they are central to sustaining and transmitting African culture. In “Indigenous Knowledge and Its Expression,” Tanure Ojaide states, “songs have an important social function, for they maintain a delicate balance between the

general good of the society whose ethos must be upheld and respect for the law-abiding individual. As Micere Mugo notes, “Within the world of orature the woman had a lot of power. She spoke the word. She created the word. She was instrumental in defining the ethics and aesthetics around which the world operated” (qtd. by Kolawole 92). The fact that women were vectors of social, moral and ethical codes not only indicates their centrality as socio-political influencers in their communities, but also the immense creativity they exhibited. For example, most indigenous African women sang and performed satirical songs to condemn social problems. Based on the growing body of Africana literature, indigenous African women understood themselves as spiritual beings, and as such, operated within their communities accordingly – as cultural carriers, catalyst of change, artistic creators, and socio-political regulators. With the intent of upholding positive norms of their respective communities, African women can be viewed playing each of these roles (and many more). In no other space is woman’s connection to divine principles and lived experience more visible than in their African oral history.

As Ani and Fu-Kiau note, all things in the African cosmogram are interdependent. As a result of this worldview, “many early African cultures did not separate the sacred and secular dimensions of life, but created images that depicted Black women as sacred embodiments of social, spiritual, and cultural power” (Razack 129). Additionally, “most sources agree that many West, Central, and North African societies did not demonize sexuality or the female body, choosing instead to valorize the awesome spiritual powers of fertility, healing, and creativity embodied in women and their sexuality” (Razak 130). While precolonial, indigenous African women are associated with honorific attributes of divine goddesses, this divine status placed many physical burdens on women in many traditional African societies.-Based on these

observations, I argue that precolonial indigenous African women's spirituality can be defined alongside these divine attributes. In the satirical poem, "I am your betrothed," included in Margaret Busby's, *Daughter of Africa*, the Kgatla singer's lyrics indicate that fertility, fecundity, and procreation mark the female existence; as such, women's spirituality becomes associated with patriarchal gender expectations that often place women's wellbeing at risk. The satirical content of the song demonstrates the extent to which Kgatla women understood this distinctive biological function and the undergirding burdens of womanhood as this status is related to collective life. Satirical songs have mocking verses addressing social vices such as laziness, vanity, wretchedness, miserliness, flirtation, adultery, prostitution, wickedness, and greed, among others" (20). Because satirical songs touched on every aspect of African life, they are perhaps one of the most commonly studied genres. These songs have many purposes, and as such, embody women's spirituality and knowledge of their roles in society through diverse themes: love, motherhood, marriage, labor, jealousy, death, anxiety and much more. However, as evidenced here, the most prominent subject matter of satirical songs among traditional Kgatla women is male domination.

In "I am your betrothed," the Kgatla woman typifies the integral role indigenous women play as social carriers, specifically for their sexuality. For indigenous African women, sexuality is intricately bound to life-giving capabilities; however, in tandem with the spiritual importance of procreation to sustain life, marriage is viewed as a necessary extension and a woman's responsibility. Through her use of insults and mocking verses, the Kgatla singer resists this patriarchal expectation, thereby indicating that indigenous African women used satirical songs to be seen and heard – to make demands, enunciate self-healing and self-assertion, to condemn

social ills, and negative values (Kolawole 95). Based on I. Schapera's translation, the woman sings about a man who claims she is soon to be his wife:

I heard it said that I was betrothed
And one afternoon when I was at home,
As I was sitting, I saw a fool coming.
He came dragging his coat on the ground
And his trousers were made of khaki.
I said to him, 'Fool, where do you come from?'
He replied, 'I am your betrothed.'
I gave the dog a chair and his tail hung down. (Busby 3)

Satirical songs in precolonial Tswana usually took place during marriage ceremonies. Typically, the bride and her girlfriends would sing satirical songs to the groom and his female relatives to voice her concerns about marriage, leaving her home to live with her new husband, or to entertain her in-laws. Women composed satirical songs during the weeks leading up to the marriage. The more creative and cleverer the song, the more favor the woman received from her in-laws and husband. Although these marriage practices are celebratory and can last for weeks, the insulting and mocking verses indicate that marriage also came with many responsibilities and burdens for women. A closer look at her lyrics highlights the uncomfortable truth that womanhood and spirituality are inextricably linked to procreation, and as a result, necessitate unyielding personal sacrifices that placed women's welfare at risk for the greater good of her community.

To place the female singer's criticism in context, understanding of how marriage, sacredness, orality, and symbolism merge to create African women's understanding of

spirituality is necessary. The principle concept to understand is, that which is sacred is practiced. According to Robert Douglas, author of “African Aesthetic,” “many African scholars agree that a primal reason for African people art from prehistoric times forward is that it serves a survival function that involves giving physical form to spiritual meaning. (“African Aesthetic” 7). For precolonial indigenous African women, spirituality is not simply an activity to be believed in or observed from afar – it is what they did every day. The female singer demonstrates this concept of spirituality by using her voice as an instrument to conceptualize the sacred plight of women.

As spirituality is something constantly in practice, most African people consider the human body a vessel used to give physical meaning to the spiritual. For women of African descent, the ability to give birth epitomizes her connection to life-giving properties associated with the spiritual realm. The spiritual realm consists of unbounded, limitless energy from which ALL life is born, or has the potential to come into physical existence. The act of giving birth, likewise symbolizes woman’s connection to the ancestral realm, which contains the spiritual essence (energy) of all living things that once existed in the physical realm, such as ancestors who have passed, or as I say, transcended into a different form. In the African worldview, when a baby is born, the baby is believed to possess the spirit, or energy from past ancestors who once lived and aspects of unborn energy from the spiritual realm. Thus, via this connection, women are intricately tied to the ancestral realm. Through the stages of pregnancy, women’s physical ability to translate that which is intangible (unformed matter, unbounded energy) into that which is tangible, or physical, likens the female body to a vessel or conduit through which women are able to conceive of a new life form, which likewise embodies all three dimensions of the universe: the spiritual, ancestral, and physical. Women’s proximity to all three life-forces of the universe, and the ability to translate that which is intangible and sacred into that which is

physical and sacred suggests that the concept of Divine Feminine symbolically placed women in the closest proximity to god. From this perspective, the African human can only be defined through interpersonal relationships. Thus, the body is a medium between the lesser world (animals, plants, rocks) and the spirit world, which includes supernatural and paranormal beings. This concept still stands among indigenous African people today, and by extension, among the African diaspora, too. This rejection of separation inherent in African spirituality explains why orality is so integral to indigenous people and the African diaspora. As an artform, women's oral history connects their corporal bodies to the spirit realm, which explains why women are *the* most important figures in communal life. As stated earlier, their physical proximity to life-giving elements (fecundity, fertility, pregnancy) inextricably links them "to [all] of life's sacred passages—birth, initiation, marriage, eldership, death, rebirth" (Douglas 7).

The African practice of manifesting the spiritual in the physical operates in tandem with their understanding of the female form as divine. Thus, marriage is a sacred practice among indigenous African societies because of women's direct link to procreation. Indigenous African people believe that the soul of their ancestors and the life force of the unborn are in the spirit realm. In order for the ancestral souls or life-force of the unborn to enter into the physical realm, a woman must birth them. Her body is literally a vessel in communion with the divine spirit world, and so it is through her body that marriage becomes sacred. Through the woman, all beings in the universe become united, which symbolizes the height of human existence. Daniel Egun corroborates this fact, stating:

For many African communities, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet unborn.

All the dimensions of time meet here, and the whole drama of history is repeated, renewed and revitalized. (96)

The emphasis African people place on unity indicates that this is the highest expression of divinity for men and women. Not only is marriage sacred because it symbolizes the unity of the universe, but also because it allows for procreation.

Even though African cosmology offers a holistic approach to the human experience, under the strictures of patriarchy and patriliney, these values become morphed, imposing many gender imbalances on women in Setswana, which deteriorated their wellbeing and denied them many forms of agency. Because many precolonial cultures consider man to be the dominant sex, early African societies tended to marginalize women in socio-political and religious spheres. Faustin Kalabamu describes how patriarchy operated in Setswana, which indicates that Kgatla women were expected to display their spirituality through subservience, passivity, and abuse:

Pre-colonial Tswana societies were based on patriarchal structures and institutions characterized by dominance and corresponding female subservience. At the household level, marriage was a vital gender contract through which men dominated women. First, any unmarried woman who became pregnant was publicly scorned and humiliated and her child killed at birth or made to grow under pronounced stigma. Second, every married woman was required to reside at her husband's home throughout her life. Divorce was strongly discouraged. Third, polygamy was permitted and infidelity by men more tolerated than infidelity by women. Fourth, boys were preferred over girls. (Kalabamu 239)

Despite the humor the singer uses in her satirical song, she criticizes a very real social issue: that there is no other outlet for women to express their spirituality except by way of their gender. Her criticism against patriarchy criticized that a little girl child is born to fulfill her role as a wife and

mother. Even though the song is short, her rhetorical strategies depict the dangers of patriarchy, particularly in its mutation of ritual practices and rites of passage that go against the protected status women are supposed to receive.

By satirizing the male, the Kgatla singer parodies the patriarchal positions Tswana men are socialized into from boyhood to manhood versus the subservience young girls and female adolescents are trained to uphold well into womanhood. For example, gendered differences are a hallmark of the initiation schools of *Bogwera* and *Bojale*. It is extremely important to note that these initiation schools for boys (*Bogwera*) and girls (*Bojale*) are both sacred and gender conforming all at once. According to African cosmology, that which is sacred are all things that sustain, prolong, and/or maintain the harmony and balance of life. As all things fit into this cosmogram, there is no separation between divinity of the spirit world and the physical world. All humans can become divine, but they must do so through a series of stages and rituals that prioritize the harmony and balance of life. As such, sacredness in the African worldview also pertains to individual human practices that sustain communal life. *Bogwera* and *Bojale* are just one example of these sacred practices the Kgatla of Tswana observed as essential to the cultural norms of everyday life. But, at the center of these initiation ceremonies, one cannot overlook that female subjugation is a necessary component for community prosperity.

During *Bogwera* and *Bojale*, young girls and boys underwent initiation wherein an unequivocal distinction was made between woman and man as understood by the Tswana community. As the Kgatla singer alludes to, these distinctions were inherently problematic because “[m]en were presented as superior while women were seen as inferior as far as their relationship to one another was concerned (Nkomazana 26-27). These distinctions appear in the final stage of initiation, called *mephato*, or the naming process:

The *mephato* names, which spelt out gender roles, did not try to encourage the distribution of power of leadership, property ownership and public leadership equally among boys and girls. While men were marked as public leaders and property owners, girls were confined to domestic work – cooking, childbearing, fetching of water, gathering firewood, etc. (Nkomazana 30).

Feminine training restricted women to the home and household duties, child rearing, agriculture, and motherhood. It also denied women any agency as political and religious figures. During *Bojale*, boys on the other hand were trained to be leaders, as demonstrated through cattle farming, training for chieftaincy, and access to the Kgotla, which women still are not permitted to access to this day. Males also reserved the supreme right of all adult males to communicate with *badimo*, or the ancestral realm of the living dead. Their induction into manhood ended with circumcision and the understanding that they were to seek a wife and continue their legacy through their child(ren), preferably sons. Men who did not marry or bear children were considered a failure. Essentially, girls were trained from childhood to be subservient to men for their entire lives. Hence, *Bogwara* served as a pivotal rite of passage denoting girls' transition into womanhood specifically because they have undergone training on how to be a good wife. As Nkomazana concludes, "at *bogwera* girls have reached nearly to a climax in their life, for they expected soon to be married, and to be a mother they considered the chief end of a woman's existence, having been trained so since birth" (28). Thus, every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full" (533). Evidently, the height of spirituality for women is motherhood.

Throughout the song, the singer purposefully disfigures the traditional marriage custom called *patlo while* accurately representing feminine ideals of *go laya* ("Be a Fool Like Me"

Ellece 45). Her rhetorical strategies ultimately are taboo because as a woman, she makes a mockery of male dominance, and demonstrates how crippling these values are for women because they are forced to relinquish their agency as wives. The opening lines, “I heard it said that I was betrothed,” articulates the passivity women were taught to assume in matters of marriage. The linguistic passivity of the line thus indicates that the young woman’s choice and consent are not required for marriage. This absence of agency shows that “in Setswana the marriage process is represented as an act performed on a woman by a man or by his relatives on his behalf” (Ellece 92). During ‘*Patlo*’ (marriage negotiation/seeking the hand of the woman in marriage), this gender imbalance can be seen in the leading role males and their families/affiliates assume in finding a wife. Even though parents are responsible for matching their children with spouses, the son’s parents acted under his instruction to find him a suitable wife, but parents typically did not inform their daughters when they were going to be married off until a *go-between* (friend of the family who speaks on son’s behalf) contacted the family (Ogoma 97). According to African customs, daughters could protest marriage arrangements, but because it is not considered proper upbringing for a girl, most respectfully agreed with their parents. Plus, African children, especially girls, learned the most powerful modelling of male/female roles from their parents, and strove to mimic their relationships (Ogoma 28).

Likewise, women became objectified as wives in marriage proverbs that the bride and groom’s family sung during the bride’s giving away ceremony. In “Agency and Gender in Setswana Marriage Practices,” Sibonile Edith Ellece outlines how marriage proverbs, or speech acts, relegated women to these passive positions:

Groom's family: "Crocodile people, we ask for water (wife). There is the water (wife), we give it to you, drink it in peace. Crocodile people, we come from afar, we are thirsty, we ask for water (wife).

Wife's family: We give you the water calabash/gourd (wife), there it is. As you can see it is in good condition. If it no longer serves its purpose, ... bring it back in good condition; do not break it - -

Groom's Family: We have taken it the water calabash (wife).

Wife's Family: These are the parents we are handing you over to. You are no longer a child of this household.

Groom's Family: We have taken her (wife). We have taken her, oh have taken her away.

Mother oh mother oh who is going to remain working for you? (Ellece 92).

This song is one of many sung after bride wealth had been exchanged, and the bride's female family members prepared her for her transition from woman to wife. Based on the verses, during 'patlo,' women are initiated into their marriages as things to be obtained. They are a goal men must achieve in order to be fully recognized as a man. Either women are being given away (as water), taken away or obtained (like the calabash), or instructed to serve, all in the interest of their soon-to-be husbands and in-laws (like the broken calabash, a wife can be returned to her family if husband/in-laws view her as unfit). According to these marriage practices, it is very clear that the groom "marries the woman and not the other way around" (Ellece 92).

What makes this satirical song so profound is the singer's ability to subvert the passivity women learn since birth as a weapon to undercut values men and women learn during *go laya* (marital advice). While men are taught to be leaders, women are taught to bear mental and physical abuse from her in-laws and her husband. As noted, the first thing men learn from birth

is that they have access to and power in political matters, religious affairs, their households, and most definitely, over women. While elder men from the groom's family advise him not to "turn his wife into a donkey" (abuse her), to "consult" her in all matters, and not to "spend the night out" (be unfaithful to her), these values depend on the assumption that women are "child-like" (Ellece 50). Consultation, for example, actually means to teach the wife right from wrong, what she should and should not do (Ellece 50). Although the marital advice men receive from their family does reinforce some positive values, the emphasis elders place on domestic abuse and infidelity corresponds with the very high death rate indigenous African women experience as wives. In addition, while faithfulness is encouraged, men often participated in polygamy.

These high death rates are directly linked to the unequal power relations, which appear most clearly in the advice women receive as new brides during traditional marriage practices (Ellece 43). For example, in the following excerpt, passivity, silence, labor and faithfulness are virtues women must exhibit as wives:

That you should give them water to drink, that you give them water to drink. When a man comes home in the evening, he should not find you out, in the night. And you are not supposed to sweep away the feet of your mother-in-law when she has come to see you. You see me my elder sister's daughter, be a fool like me. Tomorrow we should not hear that you have returned [from your marital home]. (Ellece 46)

The reference to the wife at home solidifies that women held no agency in social affairs. They could not own land or a home, manage cattle, or access certain religious rituals. And while faithfulness to one's husband is a necessity for being good wives, it is not a criterion for being good husbands. The advice, to "be a fool like me," is perhaps most shocking because it necessarily places the welfare of wives at risk. A fool is "someone who is so stupid and passive

that she may as well be dead” (46). In the context of marriage, to be a fool means that as a wife, a woman should turn a blind eye to the man’s transgressions, so much so that she will become an imbecile to his faults, that she will not recognize the injustices he commits against her.

Finally, the remaining lines dissuade young brides from returning home. These instructions therefore discourage women from leaving their husbands even if they are suffering domestic abuse, or marital abuse from their husband’s in-laws. In fact, as customary marriages indicate, women seldom left their husbands because this action would bring shame upon their family’s name. Husbands were the ones who were allowed to leave their wives or marry a new one if the first did not bear him a child, failed to manage the household (which included the in-laws), cheated, or was deemed to outspoken/assertive. Interestingly, these value systems above are given in solidarity with other women, indicating that elder women [and most others] operated within the confines of patriarchy, and understood their role in sustaining male-centric values.

Through extraordinary creativity and wit, this *Kgatla* woman brings to fore the oppression she, and other women experience as a result of these patriarchal customs. She stresses how destructive these value systems are for women by emasculating the male figure. And what better way to achieve this feat than by stripping away all the symbolic/ideological markers that signify socially acceptable attributes of masculinity? Insults are the first rhetorical move she uses to emasculate the male figure. She refers to the man as a fool, which as noted above, demarcates blind subservience, passivity, femininity, and womanhood. Lunatic is another interpretation of a fool. In Setswana, a fool refers to people who have some sort of mental or physical deformity that prevents them from participation in societal norms. While there is no stigma associated with the term when used to refer to people with disabilities, the connotation in which the woman uses

it here is certainly negative. By equating the male to a woman through a litany of gendered attacks, she implies that men are really the weaker sex.

She also uses ideological symbols to emasculate the male character. When she describes her 'betrothed' as "a fool coming / [...] dragging his coat on the ground / And [...] trousers [...] made of Khaki," she elongates him from any African cultural identity, especially those of precolonial Botswana (Busby 3). The man's disgraceful appearance, for one, references stray males who have been banished or alienated from their communities because they have not attended initiation schools where boys learn how to become a man, and transition into a fully contributing member of their respective society. His disheveled appearance, then, does more than just ostracize him. It strips him of any honor associated with African manhood, and most certainly disqualifies him as any African woman's potential husband. According to Fidelis Nikomazana, the severity of this alienated status extends to both men and women. She states,

It was impossible, or rather unheard of, for parents to present, or allow their son to marry, a girl who had not undergone initiation. In fact, uninitiated men and women were despised as socially incomplete and incompetent. Such people could not marry nor partake in the councils of men and women because they were still 'children' and 'unfit' for such activities.

(32)

Our singer goes further to demote the male through symbolism. Where the man is unfit according to his lack of initiation education, he is also unfit for the very possibility that his allegiance truly belongs to the British. Because Khaki first appeared in Africa during the Boer War of 1899 - 1901, his khaki trousers suggest that he is an 'Afrikaner sympathizer' who fought with the British against the Boers. Khaki is what militia men wore to denote their military affiliations, and the entitlement associated with it. Not only did khaki assert dominance over

African natives, but it also connoted dominance over African land, resources, and women. In elongating this male figure even further from the sacred practices and customs of the Kgatla, she has craftily emasculated the archetypal male figure on two accounts of shame: the first for being uneducated in initiation rites, and the second for his foreign status as an abetting colonizer during the Boer War.

Finally, through the use of speech acts, the woman denigrates any lingering social ties to manhood/masculinity he might have by reversing male/female gender roles. While males are expected to demonstrate dominance over women through leadership and assertiveness, this male does not. As the singer, it is the woman who dominates the narrative just by singing her song and telling her tale. Her authorial voice is assertive and audible, even when she is silent. The directness of her insult in lines 6, “Fool, where do you come from?” corresponds to the power women invoked through song. Even though customary initiation rites and marital advice taught women to be silent, passive, and subservient in a man’s presence, this Kgatla woman’s voice is everything but: her words ring loud and true as she insultingly chips away the male figure’s status as a man.

Even in silence the woman dominates. In the second speech act, “I am your betrothed,” one can argue that the man has assumed a submissive role in relationship to the woman. Firstly, as earlier established, the man marries the woman and not the other way around. Yes, in this song, the man does invoke his male supremacy by approaching the woman, but he negates this self-appointed male action through his own linguistic slip up: in stating “I am your betrothed,” he places himself in the very same subservient position women occupy as wives. As Sibonile Edith Ellece clarifies, “in Setswana the female cannot be the subject of an active clause where marriage is concerned” (92). Even in speech, the role of a woman is that of a thing acted upon by a man.

But here, it is the other way around. The arrangement of the man's utterance mimics the ceremonial objectification ascribed to women during marital advice. Like the calabash, the water, the wife, and now, "your betrothed," he becomes a *thing* to be obtained.

In her final speech act, "I gave the dog a chair and his tail hung down," she does more than just emasculate the man: she denounces male dominance as a birthright altogether (Busby 3). Her reference to the man as a dog with his tail hung down is highly insulting because it implies bestial servitude and docility. Indigenous dogs in Africa are often stray animals, and as such, have no affiliation anywhere. They wander from place to place looking for food, or someone to care for them. Whoever consistently interacts with them, either by feeding or trust building, becomes their master. Even though these attributes are what make humans love dogs so much, one cannot overlook that these very same traits also make them submissive and easily subdued. And, as dogs are descendants of pack animals, their genetic coding makes them more responsive to being led by another alpha male. These very same characteristics align with the teachings young Kgatla girls learn at an early age and spend the rest of their lifetimes practicing to serve men.

Like the dog, women in Kgatla are taught to accept the guidance and care of a husband versus being taught to lead. Again, the singer has subverted this expectation. Even though she seems to perform a subservient action by giving the dog [man] a chair, she is really asserting her dominance. Based on the man's disheveled appearance, lack of familial/cultural ties, and foreign identity, he is very much like a stray dog seeking a master. He has found her, which explains why she portrays the dog with his tail hung down, for this is a symbol of trust and submission. And as women are viewed as the weaker sex, this imagery becomes even more poignant as it also alludes to a sexually impotent man. In African customs, the failure to bear children is

viewed as the highest shame for men. In fact, husbands often placed blame on their wives for bareness despite the fact that their inability as a couple to conceive could be because he is sterile. According to Megersa Regassa, calling a man a dog “is considered [the most] ignoble and disrespect[ful]” insult an African woman can bestow upon a man (28). The social denigration attached to the word ‘dog’ coupled with the imagery of an impotent male figure clarifies why this insult weighs so heavily when coming from a woman speaker. In stripping away all of the honor associated with masculinity/manhood and ascribing him to a woman’s status, the speaker enunciates that men are not ‘born’ superior – they are socialized into this role off the backs of African women.

From the perspective of African cosmology “I am your betrothed,” poses some enlightening revelations about this worldview, and some troubling implications that hindered Kgatla women’s wellbeing. One finds that all African artforms, including orality, were composed to honor the unity of the universe. More importantly, we learn that orality was precolonial women’s domain. Through creativity, intellect, and humor, certain African women used song and dance as corporal manifestations of their spirituality. However, their spirituality was closely linked to procreation, rendering girls and women incapable of expressing spirituality outside of patriarchal practices.

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CHAPTER TWO: THE ANTIQUITY OF BLACK THOUGHT IN ANCIENT AFRICAN WOMEN'S WRITING

Despite numerous historical and scientific advancements, Europeans continuously deny the authenticity of African peoples' identities – even accredited scholars renowned for their academic achievements claim that Africa is a continent devoid of intellectualism, innovation, and culture. Of course, to reconstruct what Europeans have intentionally distorted, African/a scholars must step in to right these injustices. I write to participate in this initiative. My goal in this chapter is to illustrate that Black-skinned, African people are indeed the founders of Egyptian Civilization. This racial distinction is important to note because many mainstream scholars of the past and present erroneously claim that Egyptian civilization began 'out of Africa' with the Arabs, the Greeks, the Persians, and even colonization. In short, these European scholars prefer to believe that Africa's own dark-skinned/Black inhabitants had nothing at all to do with the complexity of thought and culture in Egypt, which still perplexes people today. As a highly educated, Black scholar, I truly find this discrepancy disturbing. Not only does this myth fuel racist agendas to strip African people further of our cultural backgrounds, but so too does this myth obscure how fundamental African people have been, and continue to be, to the development of Western civilization. Ultimately, African indigenous knowledge has a much longer history than European scholarship accredits. Thus, in this chapter, I explore the pastoral and prehistoric origins of African epistemology by investigating Maat, which is the first and most enduring ethical and moral code ever to exist. Maat is also the world's first civilizing epistemological framework. Research shows that this ethical standard originated among pastoral

Black Africans, became the unifying standard of living among Egyptians, and remains a guiding practice among contemporary African / African diasporic groups today. For this exploration, I use pastoral in the same way that Gyekye does in *African Cultural Values*. That is, Maat arose out of African people's own experiences with the natural world and their view of the world. Coupled with the mysticism of nature and natural curiosity about their own existence, Maat is rooted in and defined through nature. Maat's progression from a pastoral spiritual practice to that of a leading, organizing Black worldview can be traced through ancient African cosmology, in the writings of Queen Makeda, Queen Hatshepsut, and finally, in the African philosophy and practice of Ubuntu. Ubuntu, is a unifying ethno-philosophy among the African diasporic collective. As a shared system of knowledge, it defines humanity through communal wellbeing versus individualism. This philosophy asserts that "the benefits and burdens of the community must be shared in such a way that no one is prejudiced but that everything is done to put the interests of the community ahead of the interests of the individual" (Mangena).

The Problem with "Whitening Egypt"

Black studies scholars agree that Africa is the crux of all modern civilizations: they even agree with scientific discoveries that show all life began in Africa. But what's most puzzling is how frequently Western scholars support erroneous claims from mainstream European Egyptologist, past and present, who contend (1) that Egyptian civilization (ethics, ontology, culture, etc.) arose from non-Black people; (2) that the complexity of thought among Egyptians began 'out of Africa.' "Some even venture to put into writing that the birthplace of the so-called "Negro" was in some place other than Africa and that the group later entered Africa from the outside. The trend in recent times, rather than denying the Negro an African birthplace, is to declare that "race is largely in the eye of the beholder; it is more a matter of social ascription than

of biology" (qtd. by Vera Nobles 432); and (3) that the Greeks and Persians set the foundation for all of Egyptian civilization, and by proxy Western and African cultures, too. Thanks to the work of leading African/a scholars, one can see how these claims cannot possibly be further from the truth. In fact, by exploring the pre-dynastic origins of Maat among pastoral Africans and Nubians, one notes how this guiding principle grew to govern all of ancient Egyptian life from the Old Kingdom to the New Kingdom. Thus, Maat bears witness to the ever-present durability of African epistemology as *THE* founding principle upon which Egyptian civilization is built.

Pre-dynastic Origins of Maat: Pastoral Africa

Maat has a very long history among African people, but most scholarship begins its trajectory with a whitewashed version of Egypt. In this narrative, Caucasoids invaded Africa, civilized the people, cultivated the land, and then disappeared as a result of wars. The most current anti-Black sentiment appears among scholars who now attempt to downplay the role of African people rather than outright denying Black people an African birthplace. They declare that "race is largely in the eye of the beholder; it is more a matter of social ascription than of biology" (432). The goal behind such sentiment is to deter further research that situates dark-skinned Black people with kinky hair at the center of their own histories and as forerunners in the development of the modern world. For this reason, it is important to establish the legitimacy of Maat as an African epistemology that pre-dates Egypt. To do so, one must return to pre-dynastic Nubia to understand how Black thought arose, and then became the unifying world order of Maat among the Egyptians.

Pre-historic and pre-dynastic Egypt spans the earliest human settlements to the Early Dynastic Period (pre-3150 BCE). During this time, evidence shows that pastoral and semi-nomadic Africans had already laid the foundations of Maat – they just did not call it so. Proto-

Maatian principles arose as a result of pre-historic African's intimate relationship with the land and their growing desire to articulate their place in the world. Even the briefest perusal of African myths and legends reveals the inseparable connection African people shared with nature. For example, Cheikh Anta Diop highlights that pastoral and nomadic Black Africans often report that they migrated from the east, from the region of the "Great Water" (179). Historians know these stories to be true because each account unanimously describes the presence of Pygmies along the Nile, and the great migration from the East: Dogon and Yoruba legends report they came from the east; the Fang assert that their forefathers came from the northeast; and those living south of the Nile, like the Batutsi of Rwanda-Urundi, say they came from the north (179). These historical accounts not only show that Blacks in the Nile Valley shared a common local origin, but also that these civilizations adhered to proto-typical ecological principles of Maat. Through keen observations of natural processes and patterns, early African people developed intricate and meaningful connections between their individual and communal wellbeing to that of the physical and spiritual world. Thus, as Melba Ortiz asserts, "tracing the evolution of Maat as an ethical view requires that we revisit the fundamental role ethics plays to extend, support, and valorize human survival on the planet" (2). So, when discussing Maat, the interdependence between nature and African people cannot be ignored. From the peopling of Africa prior Egyptian civilization to the ancient Saharan cultures who survived the dry northern Sahara and the rain-rich Southern region, land and humans unite as one in the preservation of life. Contrary to European suppositions that no intellectual or philosophical innovations arose from Africa, the ecological presence of Maat among pastoral Africans reveals otherwise: to cross the vast Sahara and then establish settlements along the Nile took enormous creativity, imagination, and resourcefulness (Ortiz 4).

Predynastic Nubia and Maat (before 6000 BCE – 3500 BCE)

Much research today points to evidence that Egypt is not Africa's oldest civilization – it is simply the most talked about. In 1962, a research team headed by Keith C. Seele, Director of The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Nubian Expedition, discovered a pharaonic dynasty in Nubia that predated the first pharaonic period in Kemet (Egypt). According to Dr. Kwaku, “This ancient kingdom encompassed the territory of the northern Sudan and the southern portion of Egypt. The first kings of Ta-Seti may well have ruled about 5900 BC during the time of the fifth generation of their rulers” (para. 3). This is an area that extends from northern Sudan to southern Kemet. In some literature it is referred to as ancient Ethiopia, Kerma, or as in the Bible, Kush. Today, it is called Ta-Seti. Ancient Nubia has the oldest recognizable “monarchy in human history, preceding the rise of the earliest Egyptian kings by several generations, [as] has been discovered in artifacts from ancient Nubia in Africa” (Rensberger para. 1). Additionally, these findings show that Ancient “Nubians reached this stage of political development as long as 3300 B.B, several generations before the earliest documented Egyptian King” (para. 5). The fact that current day Sudan has 80% more pyramids and burial mounds than current day Egypt, then, is no coincidence. These archeological findings support that Nubia of Antiquity had already put in place Maat as an organizing ethical principle, which one notes from the longevity of Black cosmology (as represented through burial customs and oneness), matrilineal social structures, and Divine Kingship.

The specific origins of African cosmology are difficult to trace particularly because its history is so old. However, historical findings show that it has always been a guiding force for Nubians (Ethiopians), who are the world's oldest group of people. Originating among pastoral and nomadic Africans, African cosmology later grew to influence Egypt. In ancient times,

Ethiopians were the peoples who lived in the Sudan, Egypt, Arabia, Palestine, Western Asia, and India, unlike the contemporary exclusively African association with Ethiopia (Jackson, 1970). As stated earlier, predynastic Africans did not view themselves as separate from the land – they considered themselves defined by it, intricately linked to it, and accountable for its wellbeing. In addition, although Africans viewed the world from an anthropocentric perspective, wherein they play an integral role in productivity, their viewpoint was all-encompassing versus individualistic. Africans defined their philosophy of productivity “in terms of cooperative and collective efforts that nurtured and fortified the philosophical notion of human interdependence with all aspects of the universal spirit” (Nobles 439). In other words, African cosmology determines the wellbeing of the individual through the wellbeing of the group, which both rely on nature. John Mbiti describes this concept as “I am because we are and since we are, therefore, I am” (qtd. in Nobles 439). John Mbiti was a prominent Christian theologian from Kenya who is most known for his role in debunking ingrained notions that African spiritual practices and religions were primitive. He has authored many books detailing the religiosity of Africans, which are based on his extensive fieldwork among diverse African people. He has left behind a rich legacy of insight that captures the endurance of African spirituality. In his most seminal work, *African Philosophy and Religion*, Mbiti demonstrates that at the heart of African cosmology is an emphasis on life as a delicate balance of oneness, wholeness, and harmony – and these are the core tenets of Maatian ethics that appeared later on among Egyptians.

Although cosmology, or Divine thought is difficult to define, there are underlying value systems embedded therein that not only re-appear among Egyptian belief systems, but also by which prehistoric Nubians governed their lives. The most important concept is procreation/creation. Because Nubian epistemology is integrally tied to nature and humans,

procreation and creation are sacred life forces. As all things were considered living and breathing, no form of life is greater than or lesser than another, simply because all have a role in preserving life. Ecologically, that which was right was that which preserved integrity, stability, and beauty of the living community (Ortiz 8). This belief corresponds with women and men's perceived role in the order of the universe: Nubians viewed their physical realm as an in-between, wherein humans were mediators (or vessels) to perform the sacred work of the gods. As Mbiti states, "African ontology is anthropocentric, and in addition to the five elements, there is a force that permeates the whole universe to which humans have access to through spirits" (qtd. in Martin 962). Another core ethical value is rebirth, as evidenced via motifs such as death, change, and transformation. Cyclicity, which is closely linked to change and transformation, is another symbolic concept Nubians honored through their belief that all things exist in a continuum, and thus never died: they were simply reborn in another form. That which is seen and hidden also play a key role in Nubian epistemology, which one notes in creation myths and legends as an ebb and flow between that which is sacred and that which is secular. This element of the unknown captures the understanding that no matter how much humans seek to know about their origins, there are many aspects of the universe that one cannot know so long as he/she is human. Thus, the unseen also becomes women and men's connection to the divine. Finally, one of the most important characteristics of Nubian Divine thought is wholeness. For Nubian people, the external world comprised many forces – seen and unseen -- that determined wo(man)'s fate, just like nature. For this reason, Divine thought encapsulates the entirety of human experiences in the realm of the living and in the spirit world: harmony and disharmony; the seen and unseen; the metaphysical and physical; the sacred and secular. It simultaneously negotiates human, familial, communal, earthly, and celestial rhythms (963). The holistic nature of African thought,

then, is ultimately what made it a divine, spiritual practice. Through Divine thought, Nubians honored the gods ensuring all elements of the natural and spiritual world were balanced and maintained.

From Nubia to Egypt

What many Western, white scholars continue to neglect in discussing the rise of Egyptian Civilization is its “Negro origins” (Diop). Their arguments are akin to popular culture’s oversaturated use of white-skinned, light-skinned, mixed, or bi-racial depictions of Egyptian pharos and queens. While these mainstream re-imaginings of Egypt are indeed a part of its very long history as one of the world’s first civilizations, I must point out that these whitewashed portrayals become more prevalent in response to the ever-growing body of evidence that places Black-skinned Africans at the forefront of Egyptian history. In the article, “Black Egyptians and White Greeks?” Bryan Banker states that contemporary Western scholars tend to dissuade the importance of race in discussions of Egypt because race “isn’t intended to play to modern racial categories; rather, it carries with it ancient poetic associations” (Whitemarsh 2018). While I can agree with this perspective to a certain extent, it is not enough to preclude the way race debates surrounding Egypt in popular and academic culture are more dedicated to denouncing the presence of Black Africans as civilizing people than they are interested in exploring this claim as a viable, well-established fact. According to Cheikh Anta Diop, Senegalese linguist, archaeologist, and leading Egyptologist—Egyptians are the offspring of Ethiopians, or Nubians, who cannot be mistaken for Greek, Roman, Asian, etcetera. He cites many Greek accounts, particularly the earliest coming from Diodorus of Sicily. For example, he left detailed accounts of Black people with “wholly hair” who inhabited the African lands of the Sudan:

The Ethiopians say that the Egyptians are one of their colonies which was brought into Egypt by Osiris. They even allege that this country was originally under water, but that the Nile, dragging much mud as it flowed from Ethiopia, had finally filled it in and made it a part of the continent . . .they add that from them, as from their authors and ancestors, the Egyptians get most of their laws. It is from them that the Egyptians have learned to honor kings as gods and bury them with such pomp; sculpture and writing were invented by the Ethiopians. The Ethiopians cite evidence that they are more ancient than the Egyptians, but it is useless to report that here. (para. 4)

Despite the tendency for scholarship to ignore the many eye-witness accounts from the Greeks, geographical, linguistic, and archeological findings corroborate what the Ethiopians asserted so long ago: Ethiopia is the cradle of Egyptian civilization, and more importantly, that these lands were undeniably Black.

In tracing the movement of Nubians to and from Egypt, one can see that Egypt did not rise in isolation from Black Thought. Archeological and climatic data from Sahara, the Nile valley, The Eastern Desert and Sudanese Nubia reiterate that (1) Egypt and Kush have shared origins, and (2) that Egypt arose from Pastoral Neolithic cattle-based cultures spanning Northern Sudan and ancient Northeast Africa (Crawford 697, 700). Today, the Sahara Desert “forms a natural barrier between two very different geographic and cultural regions: North Africa, with its Arab-influenced Mediterranean culture; and sub-Saharan Africa, where indigenous African culture is dominant” (“Sahara Desert”). However, during the formative years of ancient Egypt, there was no Saharan desert barrier. Additionally, the last wet phase ended around 2400 BC during Egypt’s 5th Dynasty. These two natural occurrences allowed people in Northeast Africa to

travel freely from south to north and east to west. This constant movement of so many diverse African people coincides with the transferal of ideas and technologies that later appeared in Egyptian civilization. The ease with which African people, and ideas, could travel explains why Nubia and Egypt have similar features that are not indicative of Western Asia (700).

Not only can one note Nubia's influence on Egypt through these similarities, but one can also see the transferal of Divine Thought, or Maatian principles, to Egypt through an exploration of Nubia at different stages of its civilization. For example, Divine Kingship is a practice that began during the pre-Kerma period (3500-3000BCE) in Lower Nubia (Sudan). As cited by Miriam Maat Ka-Re Monges:

Evidence of the origins of kingship in the Nile Valley was found in Qustal. The remains of the people who provided this evidence were part of the so-called A-group, who have been linked to ancient Kemites. The Qustal collection produced more than 1,000 complete and fragmentary painted pots, and over 100 stone vessels. The range of these and other fragments from the plundered cemetery began to indicate a wealth and complexity that could only be called royal. (128)

Among these findings in Qustal, archaeologists documented some of the largest, most elaborately decorated incense burners known to date. However, when researchers first made these discoveries in 1962, they failed to associate these findings with the social stratification of wealth that later appears in Egyptian funerary practices, quite simply, because they could not fathom such riches in Black Africa.

According to Cheikh Anta Diop, "the concept of kingship is one of the most impressive indications of the similarity in thinking between Egypt and the rest of Black Africa" (137). Later, Diop asserts that this distinction is fundamentally African – that it began among Predynastic

Nubians and later moved to Egypt by way of ideological transfer. To be clear, Maat as an ethical philosophy did not appear in Egypt until the Old Kingdom (2700-2200 BC). Among Pre-Dynastic Nubians, however, concepts of interconnectedness, balance, and righteousness were already in place as civilizing ethics. Like most African people, Nubians considered harmony and peace a divine purpose; in order to live up to this purpose, one must strive to maintain harmony, not just in the physical realm, but also in the spiritual realm. To honor this ethical standard, Nubian people strove to emulate the spiritual world through the use of material objects, symbolic meanings, and sacred rituals. As the ultimate goal for Nubian people was to get closer to their higher selves, they spent years cultivating a way of life that blends the physical with the spiritual. Divine kingship, thus, falls under the umbrella of African cosmology, and by proxy, Maat (as Egyptians would later name it) because the Divine King represented a merging of the physical and metaphysical, the secular and the sacred. He stood as a defender of both the earthly realm, as well as the celestial order, and the realm of ideas, or knowledge (Anđelković 715).

Under this divine rule, the king's duty was to protect his kingdom by preserving and maintaining balance. According to this ideology, whatsoever happens in one realm must logically affect the other, so an unfit king could very well mean the downfall of a nation. Divine Kingship likewise corresponds with the Predynastic African belief that Creation inhabits the spiritual realm. It is from this source that all humans and animals and things are endowed with spirit, or a life force (ka) from the gods. In the case of the king, his right to rule does not stem from anything other than the fact that the Gods have deemed him as fit to rule. Diop also hints at another cosmological similarity when he states that vitality, or wellness, was a determining factor for kingship in Nubia (137). Certainly, this ideology translates to Egypt during Hatshepsut's reign, for she takes over the kingdom because her son was not healthy enough to

rule. Patriarchy and patrilineal rule definitely influenced the status of Divine Kingship. Quite frankly, this role was specifically reserved for males. Typically, women claimed ties to the throne only through matriliney or by death of a male regent. Divine Kingship is a matrilineal practice; therefore, women were considered sacred through their ability to produce the next heir to the throne and to counsel the king with wisdom. Associated with the intangible Lower World of the Ancestral spirits, royal Egyptian women symbolized a direct connection to the gods and ancestors, which Kings were expected to seek by way of their mothers, sisters, and wives, for it was the King's job as male to organize the physical realm, which is associated with masculinity. Evidently, women's divinity is clearly linked to fertility and reproductivity; and it seems men had control over both.

Nubians (and other African people) have a very long history of decorating burial grounds, sites, and tombs with honorary ornaments and engravings that their loved ones might be able to use in the afterlife (Nobles 440). Among the Dongola of ancient Khartoum, African people used dish-shaped beads of ostrich shells to commemorate their deceased; in the predynastic Shaheinabian culture, the Tassa, Badari, Mustagidd and Matmar included pottery, pots, and rectangular palettes, rings, ivory, and bracelets (441). The burial practices at Qustal correlate with prototypical (pre-Egyptian) Maatian concepts, too: balance, order, and rightness. Foremost, adorning the burial sites with elaborate ornaments suggests that predynastic Nubians, like most other African people, believed in life after death. Divination and rituals, as seen in these practices, are tools Nubians used to address imbalances and maintain ideal states of being. In order to understand how this aspect of African spirituality operates, one must remember that African people consider both the spiritual and physical realms two aspects of one universe. The spiritual realm, however, is a stratified space consisting of departed ancestors, spirits (deities)

and the source of Creation (Marumo and Chakale 11697). Nonetheless, what happens in one realm necessitates a change in the next. Hence, as vessels charged to preserve life through balance and harmony, Nubians used ornaments and everyday items as conduits to communicate with the spirit world. On the one hand, these burial practices indicated that a person had lived correctly: that is, they had obeyed their sacred role in preserving peace in the physical realm. On the other hand, these burial practices signify the integral role ancestry and community played in the holistic nature of Maat:

For it is as a member of a lineage that the individual defines himself and exists as a member of society; he owes everything to his ancestors. All over Africa rituals evoke and symbolize this abstract truth, which is also an everyday experience. In expressing gratitude to the ancestor and asking him to watch over his descendants, the African is merely transposing a social reality to the level of ideas and attitudes. (Chakale and Marumo 1169761)

Therefore, if one considers that the ultimate goal in death is to reunite the physical form with the ancestral realm (11698), these ornaments that might seem so mundane to contemporary society become sacred objects that accompany the departed into the next life.

Maat and Queen Makeda, Queen of Sheba

From its original birthplace among ancient Nubians, to establishing its presence as a guiding principle in Ancient Kemet and Egypt, evidence shows that African cosmology is, and always has been Black and Divine. Therefore, Maat – in all of its ideological manifestations – has always been an African concept. Europeans tried to make these two terms separate, geographically misrepresenting Egypt, because the grandeur of African intellectualism and moral conduct made *them* feel mediocre. However, considering herstories about African Queens,

evidence shows that African communities not only developed a nuanced understanding of their role as divine beings, but also that this epistemology developed into a way of life. For ancient Africans, Maat, also known as Kemetic Ethics, determines every aspect of their lives; it is a source of literacy that determined the way ancient Africans interpreted the universe, their surroundings, the decisions they made, and certainly, the way kings and queens ruled their kingdoms.

The Queen of Sheba, or Queen Makeda remains one of the most mysterious Nubian Queens of Ancient Egypt. While historical evidence documents her presence as one of the most powerful queens, records are fragmented and very scarce. In fact, the debate still centers around who she was: was she a real queen, or was she a fictional character? According to numerous representations, she may be a bit of both. In addition to being included in religious texts, (the *Bible*, Prester John) there are many popular books about her, such as *Jacki Lyden's Daughter of the Queen of Sheba: A Memoir (1998)*. However, most recent scholarship (for example—cite some sources here) acknowledges that Queen Makeda was most likely one of the Candaces, a line of powerful queens that ruled before and during the Meroitic Period, or the Kingdom of Kush. Some scholars place her origins in Arabia, which is to be expected as Ethiopia spanned an enormous portion of the Sahara during Ancient times.

The *Kebra Negast*, “Glory of the Kings,” is a 14th century national epic, and still, it remains the most well-documented record of her life and love for King Solomon. But from an Ancient Kemetic perspective, the presence of Maatian principles imbue her narrative with so many meanings: *love* is simply the motif most talked about (according to whom? Or in your own analysis?). Thus, I find it appropriate to interpret Queen Makeda’s narrative from this Ancient African lens. From a Kemetic perspective, Queen Makeda’s narrative aligns more with divine

creation stories African people have been telling for thousands of years – before, during, and after the rise and fall of Egyptian civilization. In the excerpt, “On the Wisdom of Solomon,” in Margaret Busby’s book, *Daughters of Africa*, Queen Makeda embodies the Divine Creator, the Amma/Atum, to fortify the necessity of Maat as a unifying ethical and moral code of conduct in Ancient Kemet. Thus, it is not her love for Solomon that stands out: it is her own ‘coming into being’ that truly signifies she is *a* Divine Creator in her own right.

The author depicts Makeda as the Divine Creator through the motif of struggle between chaos and order to reiterate the importance of balance and harmony in the universe. Although harmony, balance, and peace were at the heart of Kemetic ethics, their existence did not preclude chaos and conflict. This statement is especially true for the Divine/Supreme Gods Amma/Atum. Both of these Deities had the power to choose what kind of life force they wanted to perpetuate, either chaos or order. However, since both gods recognized that favoring one life force over another would tip the delicate balance of the Cosmos, their ultimate purpose was to find that fine line between the two. This endless tug and pull between chaos and order naturally places The Divine Creator and all life at the center of conflict. Most Ancient African people understood the world to be unpredictable anyway: sometimes it was peaceful, and other times it was not. This worldview can be traced to the temperamental Sahara and Nile floodings pastoral Africans had to navigate, and eventually understand, in order to build flourishing settlements and civilizations. In the Kemetic worldview, humanity’s place on Earth, then, was to make sense out of the chaos in order to produce a healthy cosmos for the individual, the community, nature, and the spiritual realm.

Similar to The Divine Creator, Queen Makeda understood that her role as a ruler meant finding balance between these two forces. In her opening lines, “I am smitten with the love of

wisdom, and I am constrained by the cords of understanding,” (qtd. in Busby 16) she seems to be striving to live up to this principle in an allegorical sense, but not truly achieving this outcome. At first glance, her lament does not make sense: understanding to the contemporary eye seems to be a positive activity, and for all purposes, closely related to wisdom. However, in keeping with Kemetic principles, wisdom here symbolizes order. According to Maat order is divine: it is an “exalted thing and a rich thing” because it means all aspects of the universe – both spiritual and physical – are at peace, balanced, and cohesive. Understanding, on the other hand, is a divine practice, but in Makeda’s case, it is a disruptive force. In African creation myths, this dual nature of understanding as both a divine activity and a source of discord is entirely acceptable: anything can be a disruptive force when it throws off the balance of the cosmos. This understanding is at the core of African cosmogony, and persists here in the Kemetic worldview. While most interpretations view Makeda’s words as a quest for knowledge, her true conflict is really the inability to make order out of chaos.

Her inability to make order out of chaos is truly troubling, for this inability to do so makes her an incomplete – and potentially destructive – force of nature. In keeping with the African cosmology of their ancestors, the Kemites perceived all things to be inextricably connected: the spirit world is not separate from the physical world, just like nature is not separate from humanity. All elements of life exist in a sort of pregnancy, wherein spiritual, physical, animate, and inanimate beings have life and contribute to the delicate balance of the cosmos. Any tear or disorder that occurs in one part of the cosmos will necessarily harm all others, thus destabilizing – or worse – destroying the entire cosmos. This African concept is one that has been deeply rooted in the African psyche for millennia. According to Marimba Ani,

In Dogon Mythology, Yurugu is a being that is responsible for disorder in the universe. This is a being conceived in denial of the natural order, which then acts to initiate and promote disharmony in the universe. In African cosmology such a being is deficient in spiritual sensibility, is perpetually in conflict, is limited cognitively, and is threatening to the wellbeing of humanity. (“Glossary”)

Pulling from this very wise African epistemology, Kemetic principles reify that one cannot come into full being [i.e., divinity] if he/she cannot make order out of chaos. If one cannot ‘understand,’ and make sense of the universe, one cannot preserve or maintain life. Thus, how well one lived up to this divine charge determined his or her quality of life in and after death. Her physical struggle [i.e. desire for wisdom] coincides with her spiritual dilemma [i.e., living righteously]: either she actively pursue ‘wisdom’ or risk becoming *Yurugu* – and based on the opening lines of this excerpt, she is right at the cusp of the danger zone because as The Divine Creator, she can embody either force.

Much like the Supreme/Creator God, Queen Makeda is evidently a force to be reckoned with, for her presence as a life form is easy to misread, particularly because she is incomplete. Metaphorically, then, Queen Makeda’s true spiritual identity, or *ka* is unfathomable. However, she harnesses the creative forces of these powerful Gods, functioning as a catalyst of thought and conception, to determine her own fate as well as those that come after her. Through this metaphorical comparison, Queen Makeda stands as a reminder of the necessity for action as humanity strives for order. Queen Makeda’s true spiritual nature is ‘unknown’ at the beginning of the excerpt, which often causes readers to conflate her with the Primordial Waters of Nun. According to Karlenga, Nun represents precreation, or the concept of Creative Becoming. This is an integral motif of Maatian ontology that symbolizes the *potentiality and power of being* (177).

Nun exists as “an inactive, floating circle, or seed of spiritual matter-energy that is immersed and floating in and one with the infinity of precreation” (177). Nun is also perceived as the first body of water Africans perceive as the beginning of all beginnings. All matter will gain consciousness in this sphere. Because all things are created here, even divinities, these primordial waters are “dynamic, creative, innovative, and generative” (Obenga 33). Nun makes all life possible – plants, trees, atoms, humans, gods. Nun represents the first merger between matter and spirit, and contains both male and female dimensions. There are key characteristics associated with Nun, such as darkness, fluidity, invisibility, and unboundedness (177). Her unknown identity is more akin to her androgynous spiritual form, a state all things, including gods must go through in the Primordial waters.

Typically, under these conditions, the Primordial waters decide what life force *matter* will embody – and the options certainly are plentiful! But in this excerpt, Queen Makeda’s spiritual form consistently takes matter into her own powers, and then makes herself and the world she dreams of tangible. She appears first as a catalyst for thought. This capacity, to turn matter into spirit comes across most clearly in her period of precreation in the great sea, i.e., the Primordial Waters of Nun.

Through Wisdom, I have dived down into the great sea, and I have seized in the place of her depths a pearl whereby I am rich / I went to sleep in the depths of the sea, and not being overwhelmed with the water, I dreamed a dream. And it seemed to me that there was a star in my womb, and I marvelled thereat, and I laid hold upon it and made it strong in the splendour of the sun. (Makeda, Queen of Sheba 16)

Through longstanding African metaphors, the author equates thought with the unseen, the obscure, and/or the invisible: “wisdom,” “boat of understanding,” “sleep,” and “dreams” all reinforce her role as the spark that transforms thought into concreteness. As a self-authenticating, self-defining force that perpetuates her own coming into being, Queen Makeda’s spirit does not typify the “inactivity” or “stillness” of Nun: she is more like the Supreme god of Dogon cosmology, Amma; and the Kemetic God of Creation, Atum. Both of these African Gods can be seen as forces: they are catalyst in their own transformation and birth. Karlenga explains, “Through creative thought, speech, and effective action, [Amma] traced within himself the design and developmental course of the universe 266 cosmic signs contained the essence, structure, and life-principle of all things” (178). Returning to the excerpt, Queen Makeda stands as an exceptional and powerful force because her behavior mimics Amma and Atum. While her desire for wisdom correlates with the unyielding ‘*potential* to come into being’ associated with Nun, it is ultimately she who initiates action. She first envisions a world where she obtains wisdom [order], and through her own actions [speech/activity/energy], she makes this vision real [conceives]. She takes intangible matter from the spirit realm, molds it according to her own designs, and then creates a likeness in that image to occupy the earth, or the physical world]. The final lines of the excerpt, solidify the manifestations of all her transformative work:

I saved myself by confidence therein, and not myself only but all those who travel in the footprints of wisdom, and not myself only but all the men of my country, the kingdom of Ethiopia and not only those but those who travel in their ways, the nations that are around about. (Makeda, Queen of Sheba 16).

Her words bear resemblance to The Creator, Atum, who proudly asserts: “It was through my effectiveness, that I brought about my body. I am the one who made me. It was as I wished

(willed), according to my mind-heart (ib) that I constructed myself” (qtd. in Karlenga 179).

Based on her own “confidence therein,” she has successfully wielded the divine power of creative speech. She not only created herself, but she has also created life in her image. Indeed, “thought is the source of everything,” for through thought, all that which the heart [i.e., *mind*] can imagine, the tongue [i.e., *speech*] can command” (188).

Queen Makeda’s quest for Wisdom can really be interpreted as her creation myth, and by proxy, all of humankind. Inherent in her creation myth, is an ocean of possibilities [that contain] all the elements necessary for creation, but it is the Creator who in developing herself, brings being, *as an active process of understanding, into action*. Human’s divine struggle is a quest for wisdom, or correct moral and ethical codes of social conduct. Underlying this principle is the understanding that order encapsulates all forms of life, and it can produce procreative and destructive life all at once. Similarly, both spirit and matter are inextricably linked; therefore, true wholeness in African epistemology asserts that wisdom and knowledge can only come about once humanity undergoes a journey to self-discovery – not just as an individual, but as a member of a collective community that entails both the sacred, the secular and the physical. As The Creator, Queen Makeda struggles to make sense of this dynamic, but through creation born of her own understanding, she manifests the tangible world of which she dreams via the ongoing, cyclic process of understanding, or action/activity. Metaphorically, understanding can be seen as a state of *being*: in an African sense, *being* is the constant state of doing righteous acts to move oneself closer to one’s ancestors. This communal nature is at the heart of Maat, but it is also endemic of African cosmology. As Queen Makeda’s creation myth stems from this ancient African lore, the extract emphasizes that the pursuit of Wisdom, or moral order, is divine because it preserves and promotes life through an unyielding source of regenerative potential.

Principles of Maat in Ptahhotep's *Teachings* and The Speech of Queen Hatshepsut

Among the Akan tribe in Ghana, the *Sankofa* symbol – a bird flying with its head turned as it reaches towards a golden egg on resting on its back – represents the importance of history in the African worldview. *Sankofa* is expressed in the Akan language as “*se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki*,” which literally means, “it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot” (Kwartang 60). Translated from Twi to English, *San* means “go,” *ko* means “back,” and “*ka*,” means “*fetch: go back and fetch it*”. Although Sankofa has many interpretations, it ultimately symbolizes that the Akan people’s search for knowledge is based on critical reasoning, as well as intelligent and patient investigation of the past (61). As an African American woman, I too value this wisdom. I look back to ancient African philosophy in order to translate the continuity of Black thought. European scholarship continuously attempts to white-wash and erase pre-colonial African philosophy. In academia, this erasure comes in many forms. Mostly, it appears as neglect. William Wright, author of, “The Whitewash of Egypt” corroborates this fact, stating, “Egyptologists, many of whom appear uninterested in archaeology south of the Sahara and whose mentors had a decidedly anti-“African” outlook. Many Egyptologists today are not aware of the extent to which their educational experience has made them biased toward “Africans” (13). However, ancestral African spirituality highlights the indelible longevity of African epistemology, and its continued ability to transcend time, space, and boundaries. An analysis of Queen Hatshepsut’s tomb engravings unveils the similarities between Kemetic Philosophy (Maat) and the durability of its core principles among diverse African and African Diasporic communities. The most fascinating connection between the Maatian ethics inscribed on Hatshepsut’s burial tomb and contemporary African American practices is the concept of the Holy Trinity. In her article, “From Aset to Jesus,” Jennifer Williams asserts that Early Christians

stole icons and stories rooted in the Kemetic Spiritual System to create a belief system centered on the Martyr Jesus” (103). Williams compares Asar, Aset, and Heru to Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and God the Father.

In “Writing the History of Philosophy,” Anke Graness argues alongside Cheikh Anta Diop, Martin Bernal, and Molefi Kete Asanti that “humanity originated in Africa [and] so did philosophical thinking: it emerged for the first time in ancient Egypt” (133). For this reason, Ancient Kemetic Philosophy extends to the *Teachings of Ptahhotep* and provides an integral framework for literary analysis. While Ptahhotep’s teachings cannot be exactly dated, scientists agree that he was an Egyptian vizier to King Isesi, who ruled from 2388 – 2356 BCE, and that Ptahhotep wrote this manuscript over 4,200 years ago (Graness 134). His *Teachings* belong to Egyptian didactic writings known as *Sabayit*, or Wisdom literature. Egyptian Wisdom literature has distinct characteristics, as outlined by Graness and Carole R. Fontaine, author of “A Modern Look.” Both authors clarify that Egyptian Wisdom literature sought to teach individuals how to live a truly ethical life (134). Egyptian Wisdom literature discourse is often presented as a dialogue. It contains literary elements, such as “direct address, positive and negative admonitions, motivation clauses, and an occasional ‘proverb’ used to prove a point or provide an argument from tradition” (155).

Not only is Ptahhotep’s work the oldest preserved form of this literary genre in the world, but so too is it considered the most influential philosophical text among African and European scholars, despite the latter’s resistance to acknowledging this fact. Irrespectively, Ptahhotep’s *Teachings* laid the groundwork for the conceptualization of Maat. Maat is actually the Egyptian goddess of truth, justice, balance, and harmony. Within Egyptian mythology, she is said to have existed since the beginning of time. Her spirit as the creator of harmony and balance ensure that

all aspects of the cosmos are divinely ordered to prevent chaos. Her role as the goddess of judgment likewise suggests that her spirit be honored in all aspects of life. That is, if an individual failed to uphold harmony and balance, then she/he would suffer the consequences of his or her actions. Maat's significance was profound, for the numerous tombs, burial sites, and sacred writings emphasize her role as the "foundation upon which Egyptian society was built" (Pinch 160).

Ptahhotep's *Teachings* are thus equally significant, for his writings conceptualized the symbolic role of Maat, transforming her already-influential mythological presence into the first and oldest organized worldview – and this worldview endures even today, a topic I shall address later. Graness brings this enduring legacy of Maat to the fore in her translation of Egyptologist J. Assmann's observation:

the concept of Maat, a comparatively very early culture has coined at the highest level of abstraction a term that interlinks human action and cosmic order; in doing so it sets law, morality, government, cult, and religious world view on a common basis. (Translated by Graness 134)

J. Assman importantly points out that the concept of Maat is commonly translated as truth, order (of the social world and the cosmos), and ethical and moral righteousness or justice (Graness 134). For Egyptians, the concept of Maat requires both cosmic order and social harmony; it is the belief that all phenomena occur within a divine order – one that necessitates regularity, harmony, justice, and balance. For ancient Egyptians, cosmic order and moral order were not mutually exclusive. Both Fontaine, author of "A Modern Look at Ancient Wisdom," and Karenga, author of *Maat, the Moral Ideal*, state that the office of the king typified this unity. "As a divine ruler, or an acting vessel of God's sacred knowledge, the king upheld numerous expectations. The king

had to “. . . defend Maat and thus uphold the cosmic order and society” (Karenga 36). To do this, he had to rule by making the concept of Maat “the fundamental moral basis of his reign,” and in doing so, he upheld balance between the physical and spiritual world (Fontaine 156).

In “Ancient Egyptian Wisdom literature,” the principles of Maat manifest in specific ways, which Graness illuminates in her analysis of Ptahhotep’s *Teachings*. These principles are as follows:

- 1) Knowledge is generally considered as a precondition for a good life according to the principles of Maat while ignorance is seen as a severe deficiency (135)
- 2) Listening/hearing is an important virtue for officials (e.g. Maxim 172) as well as a general ethical requirement for every person, whether high or low, rich or poor. Being deaf does not refer here to one who is unable to hear, but to the one who ignores the rules of social order, of Maat (136)
- 3) Selfishness and greed are viewed as destructive forces to humanity / community (136).
- 4) The common good is Egyptian Humanism, or human connectedness (137).
- 5) Responsibility and reliability are central tenets (137)
- 6) The meaning of each single action is its connective dimension (137)
- 7) Maat is a programme of a political order that establishes social justice and brings the human and divine worlds in harmony. Consequently, the precondition for living a good life is to recognize that one is part of a comprehensive whole and to act in accordance with this knowledge. In order to adhere to Maat it is important to recognize one’s own place in the community. (137)

- 8) A third ethical category of Maat [is] ‘yesterday’. Here yesterday means the social memory. If ‘yesterday’ is forgotten, if the social memory falls apart, the net of solidarity will be destroyed and the world will become a place of struggle of all against all. (139)

In keeping with the unified vision of Ptahhotep’s *Teachings*, lingering remnants of Maatian ideologies likewise exist within the writings of Ancient Egyptian Women. Though Ptah’s manuscript emerged within the fifth dynasty of Egyptian rule, Queen Hatshepsut’s hieroglyphic translations on the side of her largest obelisk not only attest to her political and strategic intellect as a ruler, but also attest to the longevity of Maatian principles over the centuries. In *Daughters of Africa*, Margaret Busby includes an English translated version of Hatshepsut’s, *Speech of the Queen*. To be clear, Hatshepsut’s architect, Senmut, most likely inscribed her *Speech* upon the base of the Obelisk at her command. Hatshepsut is most well-known for building honorific buildings, initiating trade between Egypt and Punt, and using her intellect to maintain peace throughout the duration of her 21-year rule (1490 – 1469 BC) (Busby 12). As such, her *Speech* can be read as an affirmation of her divine rule, her adherence to Maat, and her success as a Queen. As outlined in Graness, both the 7th and the 2nd principles of Maat in Hatshepsut’s opening stanza illustrate her power:

I have done this with a loving heart for my father Amun;
Initiated in his secret of the beginning,
Acquainted with his beneficent might,
I did not forget whatever he had ordained.
My majesty knows his divinity,
I acted under his command;
It was he who led me,

I did not plan to work without his doing.

It was he who gave instructions.

I did not stray from what he commanded.

My heart was Sia before my father.

I did not turn my back to the city of the All-Lord

Rather did I turn my face to it. (Busby 13)

The stanza above not only demonstrates the stylistic pattern of Egyptian Wisdom literature, but it also indicates Hatshepsut's understanding of her role as a divine ruler. Keep in mind, the Egyptian belief that the King ruled through the divine knowledge of the Gods is a central teaching of Maat. Hatshepsut's consistent denotation of herself as a receptor, vessel and/or agent of the Gods best articulate her nuanced understanding of divine ruler because they symbolize her unlikely rise to power in a male-dominated arena. Here, her reference to Amun, represents her transition from co-regent to King, even though the term "King" is more often than not male-identified. Amun was a rather insignificant Egyptian God during the XII dynasty, but after the Egyptians had defeated the Hyskos in the XVIIth century, Amun assumed an unknown legacy of significance among Thebians (E.A Wallis Budge, *Book of the Dead*, cxxvi). In much the same way, Hatshepsut occupied a less recognized role as co-regent beside her husband, Thutmose II. Because he was often sick, Queen Hatshepsut co-ruled with him for over 13 years. Although she was supposed to rule alongside her son, Tutmose III, as a co-regent once he became of age, she unorthodoxly claimed the title of "King" for herself. In the 7th year of her co-regency, she made the public announcement asserting her transition from Queen to King. Her decision to appellate her authority on behalf of Amun align her unsuspected rise to power with

his characterization as ‘the god of the hidden/obscure.’ It is for this reason that Hatshepsut identifies herself as the daughter of Amun.

In other places, she equates herself with Horus (“the son of Isis” line 8) and Set (“the son of Nut” line 9). These references are not coincidental either. Horus is known for avenging his father’s legacy by killing Set – who had killed their father – and by taking over the Egyptian throne. Certainly, Hatshepsut’s Divine charge to step into the role of Kingship cannot entirely mask the questions surrounding her decision to break traditional Egyptian standards despite her promise to Thutmose II that their son would be the next heir to the throne (Budge CXV). Likewise, her appellation to the divine heritage of Set (line 9), symbolizes her divine charge to rule through righteousness, which, in the ancient Egyptian worldview, also entails constant battles against right and wrong. Set represents this ideological struggle: while Horus represents day, Set represents night; together, the two represent aspects of the same god, but it is Set who became affiliated with evil. Together, Hatshepsut’s Divine references to ancient Egyptian primordial Gods signify her authority as an eligible and righteously appointed ruler irrespective the unorthodox means she took to claim this title. Hatshepsut was not the first Egyptian Queen to claim the throne, but she is the only Queen to have done so through Divine rulership, the most established position and one reserved for male Kings.

Another principle of Maat that appears in Hatshepsut’s *Speech* is the value of listening/hearing. Hatshepsut’s use of directives likewise aligns her *Speech* with Egyptian traditional Wisdom Literature while also typifying her acknowledgment that listening/hearing is an active virtue that leads to lawful conduct and veneration from the Gods (Granness 136). The repeated “I” statements not only assert her authority as a divine ruler, but also imply that her chosen status is a result of her obedience to Amun and the principles of Maat. Her third and

fourth lines, “Acquainted with his beneficent might / I did not forget whatever he ordained,” (Busby 12) reiterates Ptahhotep’s teaching that listening to understand requires obedience to balance and harmony, and an acceptance of what is just. In consideration of the end, the end of her speech, we see Hatshepsut pass on this ancient knowledge to her audience when she says “Hear Ye! . . . / The ignorant and wise know it” (Busby 14). On the one hand, Hatshepsut’s portrayal of herself as an obedient “daughter in every truth,” (Busby 14) solidifies her upright character. On the other hand, her motivational instruction for her listeners to reciprocate the same level of respect for her words imply a subtle admonition that her audience should choose carefully how they receive her.

While Hatshepsut’s tone might sound arrogant to contemporary readers, the ninth maxim clarifies her grandiosity. The importance of listening/ hearing, as Ptahhotep advises, is their embeddedness within the framework of African communal consciousness, or memory. Ptahhotep’s teachings inform that solidarity is built through social memory. Social memory, in return, relies on the capacity for humans to hear, understand and reciprocate that which another speaks into existence (Graness 139). Therefore, what humans say and do must be rooted in truth: one shall not lie, for in doing so, knowledge loses its consistency and fragments holistic communal bonds. For these reasons, Hatshepsut’s seemingly boastful self-praise is really her method of preserving the legacy of Maat, in an earthly form. Maat stresses the unity of both physical and metaphysical phenomena; accordingly, acting Kings were charged with the responsibility of honoring this sacred bond. It was not uncommon for Egyptian rulers to symbolize this interconnectedness with sacred architecture. In Hatshepsut’s case, she erected four obelisks to honor the celestial realm of the Gods and their benevolence to their mortal creations. Ultimately, while Hatshepsut’s tone might seem boastful, she clarifies that these

buildings are emblems of her promise to act as a mortal medium between the physical and the spiritual realm.

Hatshepsut's speech reflects just one interpretation of Maat as an African philosophical construct. If we look at current scholarship, we can likewise note that principles of Maat endure among indigenous African communities and among the African Diaspora away from home. Even though these values manifest in diverse ways across diverse indigenous and African populations, these founding principles of unity, harmony, oneness, and togetherness tend to remain stable. In *Expressions of Indigenous and Local Knowledge in Africa and Its Diaspora*, Karim Traoré, Mobolanle Sotunsa, Akinloyè Ojó, define Indigenous knowledge as that which,

“describes local or community knowledge that is commonly generated and transmitted over a period of time in a geographic and historic space. This kind of knowledge is generated by local people in response to the different physiological, agricultural, ecological, socio-economic, cultural and political challenges they face.’ (3).

They further define specific characteristics of AIKS, which I see in traditional African poems. African Indigenous Knowledge is passed down from one generation to the next, and thus, is considered intrinsic to the community (3); IK is experiential knowledge, meaning that this knowledge begins with community members' lived experiences and is then passed onward. IK is working knowledge – it is practical knowledge intended for the use and betterment of the community as a whole. According to Africans, indigenous knowledge is that which they know and do. Accordingly, African indigenous knowledge is both long-standing and flexible. It can be characterized as a holistic knowledge that encompasses both change and duration. that has undergone practical experimentation within the environment of a particular society. Essentially,

AIKS is local people's knowledge that is socially constructed by a community of people through oral conversations occur between past and present members of a community (4).

Likewise, Vincent Jenjekwa, in "Locating Indigenous Knowledge Systems," asserts that Ubuntu/Hunhu are derivatives of AIKS. He references the term Ubuntu, a pre-colonial concept that arose from the Shona and Ndebele languages. It encompasses all aspects of humanity, and its core concepts have been theorized among Africana scholars to analyze issues arising in Africa, such as environmental strains, racial tensions, developmental plans, etcetera. Ubuntu has many moral and ethical connotations, which scholars emphasize frequently. In response to epistemic violence in higher education, Nomalungelo I. Ngubane, Manyane Makua conducted a researched study to determine the efficacy of Ubuntu pedagogy as a teaching framework in South African universities. Their findings revealed that *Ubuntu* pedagogy has the power to foster more self-aware, socially inclusive, and empathetic students, which promotes a sense of wellness within the larger South African community (8). Ubuntu also plays an important role in environmental justice discourses. In the article, "African "Ecofeminist Environmental Justice," Munamoto Chemhuru explores Ubuntu as an African ecofeminist pedagogy. Chemhuru concludes that Ubuntu has the power to dismantle capitalism, patriarchy, and material feminism through its emphasis on humanness and human relationships (127). Similarly, Among the Xhosa and Zulu, ubuntu literally means "a union of allegiances and relationships" (191). To these African communities, a person who is guided by *ubuntu* understands the cyclic, reciprocal and collaborative nature of life: that is, the individual does not feel threatened that others are able to do good and receive good things, for he/she understands his/her place in life as belonging to a greater whole that becomes diminished when others are harmed (191). Jenjekwa notes that there are three maxims that govern ubuntu: (1) to be human is to recognize the humanity in others and

to establish respectful connections with them; (2) should one be faced to choose between individual wealth and the preservation of life, one should choose preservation of life; (3) “that the King owes his status, inclusive of his power, to the will of his subjects” (191). Implicit in this third maxim is the emphasis that corruption does not emerge from the weak and vulnerable, but from those who wield power irrespective its different forms.

In “Ubuntu and Development,” Motsamai Molefe clarifies how *ubuntu* operates as a moral theory. At the heart of moral theory is an emphasis on human enlightenment, human nature, and self-realization. In the African worldview, human nature is capable of increasing or decreasing almost to a point of total extinction (qtd. by Molefe from Sebidi 1988). In this worldview, there is no concept of original sin, or the belief that human nature is morally depraved. There is, however, an emphasis on personal growth. According to Africans personal growth is a both an individual and communal journey, for the ultimate obligation is for the individual to become more humane by entering more deeply into community with others. So, although personal fulfillment is included, selfishness is not (qtd. in Molefe from Augustine Schutte 101). Ultimately, *ubuntu* is an *other-regarding* epistemology: the ability to see oneself in the eyes of another is the ethical priority, and as such, individuals are upheld to demonstrate kindness, respect, and generosity to ensure the welfare of others.

In “Environmental Philosophy in African Traditions,” Workineh Kelbessa traces different indigenous African worldviews across the continent in order to show how each one upholds a central tenet of the African worldview *Maat*: that all creations — animals, humans, inanimate and animate — house a soul and play a fundamental role in the cosmos. None is greater or lesser than the next although each might occupy different statuses. Necessarily, Kelbessa references the Oromo of Ethiopia; the ancient Egyptians; the Shona of Zimbabwe; the Igbo of Nigeria and

Benin; and the Xhosa and Zulu of Southern Africa. She demonstrates that each of these indigenous groups articulate this African worldview of interconnectedness in different languages and rituals, yet that all of them bring multiple non-centric philosophies to environmental ethics. The Oroma use the concept *Ayyaana/Waaqa* to refer to the ideal state of being while they use the concept *Uuma* to refer to the natural state of being. *Saffuu* refers to the mediating forces that keep the aforementioned states of existence in check (316).

Like Toni Morrison, I often wonder about the great lengths Western and Eastern Europeans underwent to commit cultural erasure in the most violent way: dehumanization and desacralization. Not only do the *Teachings of Ptahhotep* show that African philosophy was not just Egyptian Philosophy, but that it was world philosophy. His philosophical dialogue with his son is the oldest record of an organized worldview, and it is undeniably Black. However, because there continues to exist widespread epistemic racism within academic and public spheres, Ptahhotep's teachings are less studied in academic spaces. Whether academic institutions intend to or not, their curriculums are saturated with and heavily colored by Eurocentric definitions of scientific objectivity. In "Racism, Colonialism, and African Philosophy," Edwin Etieyibo states that scientific objectivity manifests as "the rejection of African philosophy or rejection of rationality or logic in African philosophy or thought" (257). In other words, because African philosophy reflects a cosmological understanding of humanity, it supposedly lacks the necessary separation observers must have when analyzing or studying themselves and external phenomena. Several scholars come to mind in the propagation of this skewed mindset. Emmanuel Kant, for example, is well-known as an influential philosopher in academia, yet his work is notably racist, as Laurenz Ramsauer demonstrates in his article, "Kant's Racism as a Philosophical Problem" (8). Per the list Ramsauer compiles based upon Kant's writings, a key takeaway is the semblance

they share with epistemic racism in academia today (8). Many scholars of African descent report being dismissed for awards, scholarships, or even funding because of implicit, but all too prevalent, white biases that inaccurately view Black scholars and research from the standpoint of inferiority. A more important point, however, is the role philosophy plays in the shaping of all human beings. By stripping African people of their access to the pursuit of philosophical epistemologies, whites in power sought to strip African people of their humanity. This narrow-sighted worldview not only stands in direct offense of African cosmology, but it also contradicts the astronomical civilizing role Ptahhotep's teachings have had, not just among Africans themselves, but the entire world. Joan Mulholland, author of, "The Earliest Western Talk: Ptahhotep's Instructions," confirms this fact:

Ptahhotep's teaching on the value of listening and spoken interaction influenced European civilizations and "early European texts (i.e., Dhuoda's (c. 843) *Handbook for William*, Alfred's (c. 1250) *Proverbs*, Erasmus's (1529) *De Pueris Instituendis*) and the Royal Society's works on language and education, and the many courtesy and civility texts of the medieval and early modern periods. (Joan Mulholland)

Despite many attempts to rob people of African descent of a historical presence, the tenure of African thought persists not only in Ancient Egyptian literature, but also within the diversity of traditional and indigenous African oral culture.

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**CHAPTER THREE: THEY THOUGHT THEY COULD BURY US, BUT THEY DIDN'T
KNOW WE WERE SEEDS: AN ECOWOMANIST INTERPRETATION OF TONI
MORRISON'S, *A MERCY***

Mother to Daughter: An Autocritographical, Ecowomanist Reflection

My mother exclaims: "Don't show me another field of cotton! I don't want to see no cotton!" This is what my mother says every time we drive to Thomasville, Georgia – and I laugh at her expression every time. I can't help it. The way she suddenly sits up, grips the steering wheel a little harder, and glares half-jokingly, half truthfully out the window. Her words make me chuckle even more. Even though I laugh, I know there's more depth of truth in her light-hearted tone than she verbally expresses.

I come from a farming family, so tobacco fields, cotton, and sugar cane are what we know. It's no surprise, then, that my nature-loving cousin wanted to have a countryside excursion for her 12th birthday. She invited me and a few friends from her private school out to the family farm in Greenville, FL. We had a full day of events planned: horse-back riding, archery, visiting the grape orchard, making our own cane juice, and finally, visiting the cotton fields. My fondest memory is still the hayrides we took to get from place to place in my uncle's old, beat-up truck. All six of us sat in the bed, laughing after every dirt mound my uncle purposefully zoomed over, eating grapes and berries we'd just picked, and screaming when a fuzzy caterpillar crawled from underneath an unwashed mound of fruit.

When we finally reached the cotton field, all of the girls' mouths dropped open, except mine and my cousin's. It was clear they'd seen some pictures of cotton in their history books, had perhaps read about the cotton gin, but never had they seen or touched real-life cotton. I

imagine the puffy white tufts looked how they'd always imagined heaven. The bulging white heads quietly sitting atop their long brown stems, like billowing clouds, powdery-white and welcoming. An endless sea of foam, the cotton ran for miles, far beyond what our eyes could see. This panoramic view still sticks in my head today, but at that moment, standing amid so much cotton with a brown sack, I felt sad. While all the girls were competing to see who could pick the healthiest, whitest blossoms, I simply felt overwhelmed. I'd seen pictures of African slaves in my textbooks picking cotton, but seeing how vast this field was struck me differently. *How many Black and brown backs had to break to harvest all of this? And for what -- just to satisfy slaveowners' greedy demands? Worse, how many children my age or younger died on this same soil trying meet impossible quotas?* These thoughts raced through my mind. Eventually, I did join the rest of the girls, but something about my experience and theirs was clearly different: they laughed and made Santa Clause beards while I wondered why my slim stash of cotton buds felt so heavy in my sack. By the time we finished, it was dark. Because I had so little cotton, the girls decided to leave me some of theirs so I could make something.

The next day, I showed Abuela my cotton mound. She was going to show me how to sew, and a travel pillow seemed like a good place to start. "Greddd the cotton!" she exclaimed. "Now our daddy kept the girls out of school a whole year when it came time to pick cotton and tobacco. The boys got to go to school and college and all that. Makes me sick!" Her voice shook in frustration at the memory. I wanted to change that part of her past so she could have the type of education she wanted, but I couldn't do anything. All I could say was, "That's not fair, Abuela. You're the smartest person I know. It's not right." Her response was simply, "It's not, but that's the way it was back then." As I've grown older and wiser, I've come to understand exactly why these stories anger me, and what they mean for my own lived experience as a

woman of African descent: where most European-American people see only beauty in the soft, white cotton fields that stretch for miles, my mom and Abuela see grueling, back breaking, exploitative labor – and I see it too. *Everywhere*.

Introduction to Ecowomanism

In her groundbreaking novel, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Alice Walker coins the term *womanist*, which she defines in three meaningful ways; however, the definitions I would like to emphasize are the second and the third because they most clearly demonstrate the connection between ecowomanism and African Cosmology, which not only correspond to the work ecowomanist activists perform, but also appear in Toni Morrison's novel, *A Mercy*.

According to Walker, a womanist is:

2. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and Black?" Ans. "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time." (Kindle Location 47)
3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.

Walker's all-inclusive, universalist definition of *womanist* reflects its rootedness in African cosmology, which by proxy, establishes the moral code of ethics that governs ecowomanism as a body of knowledge and practice. In her seminal work, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, Melanie L. Harris extends Walker's term, defining ecowomanism as

an earth-honoring tradition, one that aligns ancestral African wisdom with “the historical experiences of women of African descent – their cosmologies, spiritual truths, and religiosities that shape new perspectives on earth justice” (Harris Kindle location 361).

As an extension of ancestral African wisdom, ecowomanism shares many ethical values with African communities, such as a belief in the interconnectedness of all things – “spirit, nature, and humanity” – and an emphasis on wholeness, oneness, harmony, and community (Harris Kindle location 372). In “African Indigenous Knowledge and Research,” Frances E. Owusu-Ansah and Gubela Mji provide an excellent overview of how this ethical mandate functions:

The spirit of the African worldview includes wholeness, community and harmony which are deeply embedded in cultural values. A person becomes human only in the midst of others and seeks both individual and collective harmony as the primary task in the process of becoming a true person (Sarpong 2002; Sarpong 1991). Like its peoples, acquisition of knowledge is collective and community oriented. Central to the African worldview is the strong orientation to collective values and harmony rooted in a collective sense of responsibility – a ‘collective ethic’ – which acknowledges that survival of the group derives from harmony through interdependence and interconnectedness (Mkabela 2005; Sarong 2002; Sarpong 1991). (3)

Wholeness and harmony, or *oneness* refers to the cosmological belief that the universe is one organized whole maintained through a delicate balance of order. Because all things are connected, the African worldview naturally encompasses “an ethical mandate to care for the earth,” for “any ethical or nonethical behavior conducted by humans impacts the other aspects of the cosmological order positively or negatively” (Harris location 372). These principles

necessitate solidarity, another fundamental ethical code undergirding ecowomanism, and thus, requires all realms, elements, and beings to work together to preserve life.

Pulling again from ancestral wisdom, ecowomanism affirms the necessity for balance, peace, order, and harmony because without these benefices, life on Earth cannot survive. Therefore, much like many African/African diasporic communities, ecowomanists understand that all beings – animate, inanimate, human, animal, seen and unseen – are endowed with a divine purpose in the preservation of life, and any occurrence that happens to one aspect of the universe will necessarily impact the rest. For this reason, all things are considered sacred and equal in importance: humans are no greater or lesser than gods, animals are no greater or lesser than people, and the metaphysical is no greater or lesser than the physical. Ecowomanism extends this principle, finding solidarity between women’s bodies and the earth. The interdependent and spiritual connection African/African diasporic women share with nature necessitates a unique bond between the “feminine divine and the feminization of the Earth” (Harris “Ecowomanism” 9): it unveils a parallel between earth injustice and the abuse of women’s bodies, specifically, Black women’s bodies. Melanie Harris describes this relationship as paradoxical, stating that:

“ecowomanism interrogates the structural evils that African American women have historically faced, and argues that earth justice is and has always been a justice priority for Black women. Because of the deep value of the earth as sacred, and the interconnection of Black women’s bodies to the body of the earth, a religious worldview that translates across the African diaspora is one that African and African American women (Black women) all embody a commitment and connection with the earth. (6)

As Harris clarifies, ecowomanism recognizes all elements of the universe – whether manmade or natural, spiritual, or physical – as functioning members of the larger cosmological community. As such, every aspect of the universe has the capacity to shape women of African descent, and vice versa, women of African descent play a role in shaping their own environments and communities. Ecowomanism is more than just a theory – it is a praxis wholly engaged with women of African descent, their spiritual worldviews, and their experiences as products and agents of change within their communities. It also acknowledges that African/African diasporic people have always held a deep respect for and spiritual connection with nature, despite mainstream beliefs that we do not.

Harris defines this interdependent, communal way of knowing as *ecomemory*, or:

the collective and individual memory of the earth and relationship to and with the earth. It can be a collective set of values that guide the earth commitments of an entire community, or a singular story that reflects themes or values about the environment and one's connection to the earth. (location 570)

Likewise, in the African worldview, humanity can best be understood through community as well, which the philosophy of *ubuntu* illustrates: “Philosophically, the term *Hunhu* or *Ubuntu* emphasizes the importance of a group or community. The term finds a clear expression in the Nguni/Ndebele phrase: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other persons)” (Mangena para. 19). Rob Gaylord, author of “Welcome to My World,” presents different definitions of *ubuntu* from notable African scholars. He shows a range of interpretations while emphasizing that each one centralizes that African humanity stems from community. Mbiti provides a classic interpretation:

[The individual] owes [his/her] existence to other people.... [He/She] is simply part of the whole.... Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say, “I am because we are; and since we are, I am.” This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man. (qtd. from *African Religions and Philosophy*)

While the emphasis on communitarianism might imply that individuality, difference, and *self* are not factors in the African worldview, the human is but one aspect of the larger cosmos, and thus, it does not ignore the importance of individuality, spirituality, or the natural world. Richard H. Bell states that “African humanism . . . is rooted in traditional values of mutual respect for one’s fellow kinsman and a sense of position and place in the larger order of things: one’s social order, the natural order, and the cosmic order” (qtd. In Gaylord). Returning to Walker’s definition of womanist, her comparison of the human race to a “flower garden, with every color flower represented,” speaks to this sense of community, wherein the individual, despite differences, understands her/his role as a contributor to the community at large, and subsequently, as a contributing factor in the preservation of life.

In *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison symbolizes core tenets of ecowomanism to illustrate its efficacy as a theoretical framework and praxis among Black women in their fight for environmental justice and healing from intersectional oppressions. She brings the marginalized experiences of African diasporic women to the fore by paralleling the way their bodies have been violated, raped, and abused by white oppressors functioning to the logic of domination, and the way the body of the Earth feminine has been abused by white oppressors (Harris 422). In so doing, she negates the presupposed superiority of White supremacy, structural racism and subsequent systemic forms of oppression – i.e., classism, capitalism, and patriarchy – and the

privileged role they play as dominant world orders and destructive forces. She emphasizes that hegemonic ideologies are harmful to everyone and all living things because they necessitate domination over others and the Earth. While they intentionally function to destroy African and Indigenous communities, white oppressors fail to grasp that these very same ideologies are killing them, too, albeit more slowly. Through an ecowomanist interpretation of *A Mercy*, I aim to illustrate how Toni Morrison implements this framework to critique Eurocentric thought / white supremacy as a foundationally flawed epistemology, specifically in the fight for environmental justice. Through her depiction of fragmented organic human bonds, Morrison juxtaposes the violence white supremacy engenders with the restorative nature of African cosmology. In so doing, Morrison emphasizes two critical themes: (1) that women of African descent rely on the spiritual wisdom embedded within ecowomanism to resist intersecting oppressions white supremacy imposes, and (2) that African cosmology stands as a viable solution to environmental injustice through its ability to unify rather than destroy.

Because environmental justice discussions often ignore women of African descent and their role in this movement, the ecowomanist approach is to first debunk the myths and stereotypes regarding African diasporic women. As Melanie Harris states, ecowomanism aims to “expos[e] the terrorist patterns of white supremacy” while amplifying the experiences of Black women (Kindle location 104). In *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison participates in this discursive activism via her portrayal of fragmented African / African diasporic female characters who, as a result of white supremacist ideals and devaluation, become alienated from their roots. This alienation, in turn, ruptures their spiritual bond with each realm of the universe. Therefore, this analysis of Morrison’s novel must begin with an understanding of European epistemology. This epistemology purports the notion of white supremacy despite its presence as an oppressive

worldview. Morrison demonstrates that white supremacy, as a byproduct of Eurocentrism, fractures the individual (or *self*) into separate and unequal compartments, wherein emotions and spirit are inferior to logic and rational thinking. It thrives on dichotomization, or the splitting of phenomenon into confrontational, conflicting parts; it facilitates the pursuit of power over others, and therefore, accompanies objectification and domination.

Marimba Ani, an anthropologist best known for her comprehensive publication, *Yurugu*, a critique of European epistemology, asserts that this movement away from cosmology began with Plato. She analyzes his speech, “The Dialogues of Plato,” from *The Republic* wherein he argues that true self-mastery comes about when reason trumps emotions (Ani 32). Ani establishes that Eurocentric thought is based upon Plato’s new social order, which entails antagonizing differences, domination, and control:

And here [with Plato] begins a pattern that runs with frighteningly predictable consistency through European thought, continually gathering momentum for ages to come. The mind is trained from birth to think in terms of “splits.” The splits become irreconcilable, antagonistic opposites. Holistic conceptions become almost impossible given this mindset. First the dichotomy is presented, then the process of valuation occurs in which one term is valued and the other is devalued. One is considered “good,” positive, superior; the other is considered “bad,” negative, inferior. And unlike the Eastern (Zen) conception of the Yin and Yang or the African principle of “twinness (Caruthers refers to this as “appositional complementarity”) these contrasting terms are not conceived as complementary and necessary parts of a whole. They are, instead, conflicting and “threatening” to one another. (33)

Through her characterization of Florens, Toni Morrison extends Ani's observation, demonstrating that the first environmental injustice white supremacy inflicts upon women of African descent is the devaluation of spirit, or the *cosmological self*. For women of African descent, the cosmological self is a *complete* being – she defines her existence through interactions with her community (i.e., the entire material and immaterial universe). She views herself as an extension of nature, which is sacred, so like nature, she too, is Divine and filled with Spirit. Through her intimate connection with all things in the universe, she builds experiential wisdom through “ecomemory” and all her senses: emotional, physical, intuitive, spiritual, metaphysical, logical, rational, etc. And finally, she understands that her way of thinking about the universe and her role in it correlates with her behavior, which is inextricably connected to the sustainability of all life.

However, this fully realized, wholly complete being is not the image Morrison begins with. In the opening chapter, Morrison introduces Florens, who is now sixteen or seventeen, and has recently murdered the Blacksmith's young son, which stems from her inability to access the precious ecomemory embedded within the mother-daughter bond. As a young enslaved African girl, she first lived with her mother and baby brother on the Jublio plantation, but D'Ortega, the plantation owner, sales her to Sir (Jacob Vaark) in order to settle a debt. She is six or seven years old when she is separated from her mother, and like property, she is placed on a boat with all the other cargo being shipped to the Americas. She spends the rest of her childhood as a slave or indentured servant on Jacob Vaark's farm with Mistress, Lina and Sorrow. On several occasions, Morrison depicts Florens as a lost, very naïve, very confused, and uncertain young girl who is forced to navigate life without the proper “models,” or in her case, without a mother or mother figure (Walker 3). As a result, she both fears mothers, yet longs to have one, which is evident

from one of her profoundly troubling statements that bring this fear into question: “mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy’s hand” (Morrison 5). Fear, longing, anger, alienation, and confusion – all of these emotions rage within her, but she does not understand why.

From an ecowomanist perspective, the something Florens ‘cannot hear’ is her mother’s ecomemory, or the experiential and generational knowledge that can only be passed down from a Black mother to a Black daughter. Morrison hints at the very nuanced specificity of this knowledge when Florens states, “All of what I hear is different from what words mean to a minha mãe and me. Lina’s words say nothing I know” (4). Although Lina attempts to be a mother to Florens because she understands the void a mother’s absence leaves, she cannot seem to connect with Florens completely. According to Donna Aza Weir-Soley, author of *Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance*, the wisdom Florens lacks is a “creolized form of spirituality forged by the experiences of the slave past [which are often fragmented, unreliable, and unforgiving but nonetheless provide a sustaining] memory of ancestry, ritual worship, and cultural practices” (89). Through the mother’s narrative, Morrison precisely captures the way this wisdom operates as an essential tool for survival, especially for female slaves. In placing the narrative at the very end of the novel, Morrison intensifies both the geographical distance separating Florens from her mother and the spiritual elongation she feels, yet cannot articulate in a healthy way because she lacks the cultural guidance that comes with it.

Throughout the mother’s story, which is very much like a slave narrative, Morrison typifies how white supremacist ideals strip African people of their humanity through de-spiritualization, then reduce their status to subhuman in an effort for whites to justify their

actions. This fact rings true when the mother states, “I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. I was negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song – all of it cooked together in the color of my skin. So it was as a Black that I was purchased by Senhor, taken out of the cane and shipped north to his tobacco plants” (156). While the mother’s words in this quote reflect solidarity with the collective African experience, these new world, anti-Black identities – ‘inferior,’ ‘property,’ ‘Black’ and ‘slave’ – intersect with her identity as a female, and consequently, engender sexual abuse that she cannot escape, nor protect her daughter from. In fact, the mother opens her narrative with this fear. Florens’ “little girl chest . . . rising too soon” alerts the mother to the impending sexual exploitation and violent abuse Florens will certainly suffer if she stays with her on Senhor’s plantation (154). The mother’s fears are not unfounded. She reflects on the way Senhor looks at her with “want [sexual desire]” (155) and “like pieces of eight” (158). But worse than this, he is already looking at Florens in the same way. In tandem with her desire to wear women’s high-heeled shoes, Florens’ blossoming little girl body only amplifies Senhor’s lust. Keep in mind that Florens is six or seven at this time. While European, Portuguese, Spanish, and American white males propagandized the notion of sexual lasciviousness among African women, the mother’s story debunks this myth. Not only does she expose white enslavers and overseer’s oversexualization of African women and girls’ bodies, but she also reiterates that this oversexualization, coupled with their status as slaves, allowed white men and women to legally rape, breed, and ‘break-in’ female slaves, irrespective their age (the younger the better). The mother has already experienced all three abuses, on top of laboring all day, every day in the cane and tobacco fields.

This dysfunctional legacy of dehumanization, desacralization, sexual exploitation, and gender discrimination are exactly what the mother longs to shield Florens from, but she lacks the

agency to do so. Classless, subhuman, Black, and female, the mother understands all too well the weight of her identity in the new world: “To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below” (155). Herein lies the most harmful of assaults enslaved African women suffered: while the majority of white and white-passing women have had the luxury of motherhood and passing along healthy mother-daughter bonds, enslaved African women did not have this privilege. The institution of slavery shattered this spiritual bond, leaving a legacy of misunderstanding in its wake. In Florens’ case, for example, she misinterprets her mother’s decision to give her away as rejection, unwantedness, and unworthiness. Likewise, she believes that her mother favors her baby brother over her, and that this is the reason she gave her away. She will never know how much her mother loves her.

This traumatic moment and Florens’ misinterpretation of it dictate her behavior in ways she cannot understand: for example, in an attempt to fill the void of an absent mother, she is starved for affection and eagerly searches for it wherever she can find it. Her desperation to please, for any pat on the head, or acknowledgement of approval, likewise stems from her own internalized feelings of unworthiness. Just as young slave children “tried to please” in an effort to show their living worth (156), so too does Florens perform for the Blacksmith’s affection. She walks through the forest, risking danger, death, and capture to find the Blacksmith, not because her mistress’s life depends on it, but because she has let the Blacksmith consume her to the point where she is blindly in love. Because Florens has no concept of *self* or self-worth and lacks a connection to her mother’s ecomemory, she misinterprets the Blacksmith’s sexual attention for true love. She does not understand patriarchy and the ways of men, so she misses all of the signs that the Blacksmith is not in love with her – he just wants her for sex. She even ignores Lina’s warning about him.

However, the full weight of her mother's words come back upon her when she accidentally injures Malaik, the Blacksmith's son. Because Florens does not understand parent-child relationships, she becomes jealous of Malaik because she wants the Blacksmith all to herself. However, he rejects her, stating that she is a slave because she worships him so much that she has yielded complete control to him. It is in this moment that Florens truly learns her worth to men. She is an object to be exploited. In the end, Florens either injured the Blacksmith and his son, or she killed them. Although all enslaved African people suffered the dehumanizing effects of racialized slavery, Black women's experiences were increasingly more traumatic as intersecting aggressions posed more threats to their survival. In this manner, the mother's words – replete with memories of being bought, sold, beaten, raped, bred, alienated, and dehumanized – function like oral history, which women of African descent have called upon over many eons to impart wisdom, preserve their lineage, and prepare the next generation for life's many hardships and many blessings. For women of African descent, the absence of this knowledge ultimately leads to demise.

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality*, wherein she asserts that Black women's experiences are defined by race, class, gender, and sexuality all at once. Since then, ecowomanist scholars have expanded her theory. Most notably, In *Black on Earth*, Kimberly N. Ruffin, coins the term ecological burden-and-beauty paradox, “which pinpoints the dynamic influence of the natural and social order on African American experience and outlook” (Location 47). This term simultaneously parallels the negative racialization of the African diaspora with environmental and economic suffering, and acknowledges that racialized subjects' experience with ecological beauty results from personal and collective attitudes toward nature (Location 47). In keeping with ecowomanist criticism, in *A Mercy* Morrison parallels *a minha*

mãe, Florens' mother, with the traumatizing historical legacy of the Transatlantic slave trade, highlighting the very abusive and widespread violence white supremacy subjected African/Black women too because of their degraded status, which has left many of us scarred today. Morrison elucidates how intersectional aggressions conscript themselves across the African/Black female body via her characterization of *minha mãe*, or Florens' mother. She is an African slave woman captured during the 1700s, and as such represents the real-life environmental abuses enslaved women of African descent experienced every day. In her description of being broken, race, gender, sexuality, and class collide, condemning her to a lifetime of suffering that she cannot escape, nor protect herself from:

I don't know who is your father. It was too dark to see any of them. They came at night and took we three including Bess to a curing shed. Shadows of men sat on barrels, then stood. They said they were told to break we in. There is no protection. To be female in this place is an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below.

(Morrison 155)

The opening line, "I don't know who your father is. It was too dark to see any of them," alludes to the fact that African women were vulnerable to two forms of patriarchy: slave patriarchy and white patriarchy. Morrison shows that slave patriarchy often occurred through coercion.

According to David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, "[w]here sexuality and reproduction were concerned, slave women were quadruply burdened, by both Black and white patriarchy and by both gender and racial oppression" (210). Evidently, Morrison stresses that African women were not just exploited because of their labor – they were exploited because of their ability to reproduce, and satisfy the sexual desires of white men.

Gaspar and Darlene bring attention to another key point surrounding Black women's class, sexuality, and race: under the repressive rule of racialized slavery, enslaved African women's sexuality was intricately tied to the commodification of labor and reproduction; thus, they were more vulnerable to rape than any other group of women during the time, as they still are today. The mother's statement, "They came at night and took we," represents the long history of sexual abuse white oppressors used to subjugate Black women. This violent sexual abuse did not suddenly begin with slavery – it began with the rhetoric of White supremacist ideals, manifested on the slave ships during The Middle Passage, and continued on the plantation. By the 1700s, European ideations that African women were 'lascivious,' "promiscuous," and sexually prime had already taken hold of the European imagination, as had myths that Black women were inferior and bestial by natural law. Morrison hints at this rhetoric when the mother says, ". . . no matter what others may say, I was not a soulless animal, a curse" (157). Coupling this ideological violence with their status as slaves, white oppressors, viewed Black women's bodies as a 'land of opportunity' that was both monstrous and desirable all at once. With no legal rights and no legal protections, White men sought African women's vulnerability as an opportunity to rape, molest, and torture them whenever they felt the urge to. From this white male perspective, Black women's bodies became devoid of all humanity – a blank canvas upon which they could act upon their own phantasms, carnal lusts, and fantasies with impunity. Again, language, whether it is written or verbal, has been used by those with power to keep people of African descent, especially women, in undesirable places (Ruffin Location 176).

During the Middle Passage, white men aboard slave ships were notorious for their level of violence regarding African slaves, especially for sexually abusing young African girls and

women. In *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, Olaudah Equiano describes the sexual brutality women and girls faced:

I have even known them to gratify their brutal passion with females not ten years old; and these abominations some of them practised to such excess, that one of our captains discharged the mate and others on that account . . . as if it were no crime in the whites to rob an innocent African girl of her virtue. (1155)

Often, white men raped African women and girls in plain view of their shipmates, and invited their crewmen to participate in the activity. The frequency of these rituals ultimately became aspects of white male bonding. White males raped Black women so frequently on slave ships that it became “normalized for white men, and therefore unquestioned” (Feinstein 17). The term ‘break in’ the mother refers to the sexual exploitation white men implemented to satisfy their desires to dominate and control African women, not just for carnal pleasure, but to maximize Black people’s productivity as fieldhands, cooks, wet nurses, or even prostitutes. In this manner, rape, sexual assault, and harassment “served to control, humiliate, and degrade enslaved women and men, increase slave labor and property by impregnating the women (Feinstein 17). As Feinstein remarks, “this sexual violence and other abuses that took place on the slave ships functioned to indoctrinate and transform Africans from free people into submissive obedient slaves” (17). This widespread sexual violence continued long after the Middle Passage. To prevent uprisings, poisonings, and rebelliousness, white men repeatedly raped – or endorsed the rape of – enslaved African women, which is what Morrison highlights in *A Mercy* as expressed in the above passage. These fear tactics instilled obedience and acquiescence among Black female slaves, for if they resisted sexual advances, white men would either sale them –

separating them from their families, beat them nearly to death, or get other male slaves to pin them down so the slaveowner or captor could rape them.

Undoubtedly, enslaved African women felt the weight of white supremacy on their shoulders, but nothing epitomized the sexual brutality it incurred for them like motherhood. As Emily West states, “It represented the point at which the exploitation of enslaved women as workers and as reproducers literally intersected” (37). I cannot begin to imagine the conflicting emotions African women must have felt in those moments: heartbreak, fear, unconditional love, desperation, hope and hopelessness.

Unfortunately, like many enslaved African women, in *A Mercy*, Florens’ mother understood the burden of motherhood and what this newfound identity meant for her, especially as the mother of a daughter. With no agency to “tell them [oppressors] no,” to protect herself from the brutalities slavery engendered, she could only do her very best to protect Florens, which she admits, “never did any lasting good” (154). No matter how much she loves Florens, she cannot protect her from sexual exploitation, labor exploitation, patriarchy, or the life-time abuse of racialized slavery. And more importantly, as Morrison points out, she cannot protect their mother-daughter bond, which is the one thing both she and Florens’ long for most. In “Women, Slavery, and Labor in the United States,” Lydia Wilson Marshall explains why these bonds between mother and child were so fragile and precious:

“Enslavers’ claims on Black women’s labor included their reproductive capacities. The sexual coercion and abuse of enslaved women was systematic . . . The rape of Black women by white overseers and enslavers was widespread, a feature as central to the slavery system as labor exploitation . . . knew . . . that these bonds remained tenuous as their children could

be, and very often were, sold away from them by their enslavers . . . enslaved women's reproductive labor ensured the next generation of people in bondage. (93)

All of these realities bear their full responsibilities onto her, every day, yet all she can do is watch – watch as Florens “little girl chest” turns into breasts; watch as Florens “caught Senhor's eye” (157). It is no wonder then, that many African mothers committed infanticide, attempted suicide, or attempted to abort their babies. This observation raises another important point: enslaved women with child redefined motherhood in many ways, resorting to creative ways to protect their children as best as they could. Because the mother is intelligent, she uses her environment to her advantage on the day Jacob Vaark comes to collect his debt from Senhor. “I heard their voices and I gathered you and your brother to stand in their eyes. One Chance, I thought. There is no protection but there is difference” (158). Because of her experiences as a slave, and her understanding of how African women are victimized, she does the best she can do to keep Florens safe from sharing a similar fate as she. Seeing that Vaark is different than most whites, “because [she] saw the tall man [Vaark] see [Florens] as a human child, not pieces of eight,” she silently pleads for him to take her. Even though Florens does not understand why her mother gave her away, it is clear that the mother loves her unconditionally, when she makes her daughter this promise:

“I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night until you know what I know and long to tell you: to be given dominion over another thing is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing. Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mãe” (158).

Discourse of Domination: From African Cosmology to Eurocentrism

From dehumanization of the female African body, to the fractured, natural landscapes, Toni Morrison asserts that cosmological worldviews have never been the ‘disruption’ to the natural order of the universe – discourses of domination are truly the abusers – a point she makes abundantly clear in the setting of her novel *A Mercy* and the fragmented characters readers encounter. By foiling African cosmology with Eurocentric thought, Morrison shows that any discourse of domination, such as white supremacy, falls short in protecting the universe from abuse. The battered, scarred, and fractured American landscape of 1682 Virginia is more than just a setting – it represents the degraded memory of a time past when most humans honored Earth as an extension of the natural cosmos, and the destructive nature of Eurocentric thought as it usurps this immortal wisdom.

In Morrison’s opening narrative in *A Mercy*, Jacob Vaark treks across the America’s on his horse, Regina, on his way to collect a debt from Senhor. As he travels, he reflects on the landscape, noting how it has changed over the years. Two memories stand in stark contrast with one another. The first is his recollection of navigating the Native American lands to get to Maryland:

In his own geography he was moving from Algonquin to Sesquehanna via Chesapeake on through Lenape since turtles had a life span longer than towns. When he sailed the South River into the Chesapeake Bay, he disembarked, found a village and negotiated native trails on horseback, mindful of their fields of maize, careful through their hunting grounds, politely asking permission to enter a small village here, a larger one there. He watered his horse at a particular stream and avoided threatening marshland fronting the pines. Recognizing the slope of certain hills, a corpse of oak, an abandoned den, the

sudden odor of pine sap—all of that was more than valuable; it was essential. In such ad hoc territory, Jacob simply knew that when he came out of that forest of pine skirting the marshes, he was, at last, in Maryland which, at the moment, belonged to the king.

Entirely.

From the way Jacob and the Native Americans interact with one another, Morrison alludes to a mutual respect between both individual and community. Jacob also demonstrates a respect for the spirit world by abiding by Native American taboos that restrict certain areas of land for sacred rituals. He even shows a solidarity with nature. He ‘recognizes’ the natural landscape, and in so doing shows an understanding of its presence and importance. This scene contrasts with many fragmented landscapes specifically because it is *whole*, or *round*. There are no ravaging wars in this scene, or mass genocide of trees, or de-sacralization of sacred lands. Instead, this scene provides a model of what humanity should look like regularly, not just sometimes. It epitomizes the collective ethic humans must uphold through “a commitment to survival and wholeness of entire people” (Walker 47).

In the second scene, Morrison personifies the land as overwhelmed, burdened, and broken from land disputes, wars, religious factions, and other atrocities.

In this territory he could not be sure of friend or foe. Half a dozen years ago an army of Blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes—freedmen, slaves and indentured—had waged war against local gentry led by members of that very class. When that “people’s war” lost its hopes to the hangman, the work it had done—which included the slaughter of opposing tribes and running the Carolinas off their land—spawned a thicket of new laws authorizing chaos in defense of order. By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for Black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any Black for any reason; by

compensating owners for a slave's maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever. Any social ease between gentry and laborers, forged before and during that rebellion, crumbled beneath a hammer wielded in the interests of the gentry's profits. In Jacob Vaark's view, these were lawless laws encouraging cruelty in exchange for common cause, if not common virtue. (7)

This passage is important because it shows the seedlings of Eurocentric values beginning to take shape into a new world order. While this excerpt reflects the power of solidarity that Bacon's Rebellion is noted for, Morrison hints that it is still a misguided effort as it is steeped in white supremacist values. It fails to be revolutionary because the impetus behind the war is the removal of Native Americans from their land for the sole benefit of whites, recently freed slaves, and greedy gentry. According to African and Native American cosmologies, solidarity is a critical component in the preservation of all life, specifically because it promotes the maintenance of order, balance, and harmony among all elements and beings in the universe. Solidarity unites seemingly disparate people and organizes them around a common goal, which has the potential to benefit the entire community. However, despite the capacity of Bacon's Rebellion to unify "[F]reemen, Black and white, newly arrived landless immigrants from England, Scotland, or Ireland, and enslaved Blacks bonded together because of their common exploitation on the large tobacco estates," the intentions behind the war were skewed in favor of white interests; thus, the war was dysfunctional and separatist from the start (Simba par. 6). Now, one assumption some people commonly make about the role of conflict in cosmological epistemologies, is that conflict contradicts the harmony and balance of order. However, this is not the case: As Asante and Mozama clarify, African cosmology is not dualistic or separatists by nature. This means that all phenomenon, whether humans perceive it as 'good' or 'bad,' still have an essential role to play in

the maintenance of life. Uprisings, wars, disagreements, death – these are all forms of conflict, which spurs necessary change according to the African worldview. Change is an essential and unavoidable aspect of life, and thus, according to the African worldview, is necessary in the preservation of life. And more importantly, Africans have an understanding that living is not just about what happens, but how humans respond to and interpret the event in a way that preserves the wellbeing of the community.

However, Morrison's undercuts this brief glimmer of hope with fragmented human-human relationships that in turn, destroy the holistic solidarity Jacob initially demonstrates while passing through Native American land. The intrinsically communal understanding of nature and land use most Native American and African peoples know to be true crumbles under the weight of dispossession. Rather than deciding on new ways whites and Native Americans and Blacks can all co-exist in harmony, the Gentry responded to the already marginalized populace with a "thicket of new laws . . . eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for Black people only; . . . granting license to any white to kill any Black for any reason; . . . compensating owners for a slave's maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever" (8). This response is an abomination to the intrinsic cosmological order of the universe, as Morrison indicates through the ruptured human-human and human-land relationships. Operating from the epistemological axis of antagonistic differences, English and British elitists had already waged a war on Native American people long ago under the pretext of cultural superiority and self-proclaimed colonizing mandates.

Their decision to intensify slave laws and separate Blacks from whites represents a lack of empathy, an inability to connect with other people, and disregard for the wellbeing of the society as a whole. But, as Ani elucidates, oppositional, confrontational, antagonistic

relationships are ingrained in the European psyche. As all things are connected, this flawed logic manifests across the canvas of Native American lands. English, Protestant British, Spanish, Pilgrim Dutch, and Swedish land laws split the land into individual properties, which reflects European ideals surrounding ownership. To European settlers, land and humans are a commodity that can be bought, exploited, and sold. The result is the perpetuation of a system of devaluation that segments the human-land-nature-spirit bond on all fronts.

Because traditional environmentalist discourses are rooted in White supremacy, dominant group interests often ignore marginalized people in favor of elite interests. In her article, “Race, Class, Gender, and American Environmentalism,” Dr. Dorceta Taylor asserts:

Most researchers studying the environmental movement base their analyses on historical accounts that advance a dominant perspective. According to this perspective, wilderness enthusiasts urged people to preserve wilderness and wildlife, respect nature, and cease destroying the environment . . . [H]owever, it describes only one of several pathways of environmental activism [and] it does not account for how race, class, gender, labor market experiences, and politics influence environmental attitudes and activism. It assumes that social class has no bearing on environmental outcomes, experiences, and perceptions. (1)

Just like the ruling Gentry, this narrative centralizes white middle-class men and women’s interests, and thus purports the misconception “that Blacks aren’t interested in the environment” at all (Dr. Dorceta Taylor qtd. in “Black Women Are Leading the Way”). However, through extensive research, Dr. Dorceta Taylor highlights that Black people have always been involved in environmental justice, but through a different pathway than elite and middle-class whites. During the Premovement Era (1820-1913), elite white men “raised consciousness among the

white middle class about the beauty and intrinsic value of unique American landscapes and wilderness,” but they did so from the standpoint of recreational leisure (3). Writers such as Hemmingway and Henry David Thoreau romanticized the American countryside, garnering support for preserving the beauty of nature. Their calls for harmonious use of natural resources, protection of the Earth, and respect for nature stem from their privileged class, race, and gender in American society. Even though other pathways for environmental protection sprung from the Premovement Era, each largely ignored working class and poor people’s concerns, urban living conditions, Africans and African descendants of slavery, and the pollution of these marginalized groups’ living and working conditions (Taylor 1). Some white middle-class women did advocate for social justice reform for Native Americans and African slaves, but for the most part, their interests aligned with white middle-class men. Ultimately, Dr. Taylor illustrates that race, class, and gender do matter, not just in the way people perceive nature, but also in the way they experience their environment, and social reform discourses they develop. Where white middle-class interests prioritize preserving nature from the standpoint of leisure, Black people have advocated for environmental activism through social justice reforms out of a need to survive in inhospitable political landscapes and environmental terrains intentionally made so.

Re-Imagining Humanity through African Cosmology

Another important aspect of ecowomanist activism is being a visionary: it is not enough to deconstruct the ills of white supremacy – it also requires constructive solutions that allow space for a new way of imagining humanity. For women of African descent, re-imagining begins with the age-old African concept of interconnectedness. As a result of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, women of African descent are both daughters of Africa and unwanted new-world descendants forced to adapt to unfamiliar cultures, languages, laws, et cetera. Reimagining, our

humanity then, comes with the heavy burden of debunking myths, resisting intersectional systems of oppression, and re-affirming our identities with sovereignty; it necessitates an abundance of creative energy that stems from our will to adapt, survive, and thrive in environments that are intentionally designed to be inhospitable, anti-Black, anti-female, anti-woman, classist, and devoid of spirit; it requires an admixture of experiential knowledge, ancestral wisdom, intuition, and creativity. In response to external pressures, women of African descent rely on this spiritual lore to navigate external societal pressures and establish a way of living that affirms who they are. Through her characterization of Sorrow as both a Yoruba goddess and daughter of the new world, Toni Morrison typifies this creative energy by providing her own creolized version of African cosmology, one that not only incorporates aspects of ancestral African wisdom, but also aspects of new American ideals. In so doing, Morrison amplifies the age-old wisdom that African people have known since time immemorial: that Earth justice requires reconciliation and solidarity between all aspects of the universe.

Toni Morrison's syncretic development of Sorrow mimics the de-centeredness of African spirituality, particularly, its powerful capacity to merge purportedly disparate aspects of humanity in order to sustain life. Sorrow embodies traditional aspects of African cosmological sign systems, yet must learn to adopt new modes of being based on American sign systems as she navigates the unfamiliar terrain of white supremacy, patriarchy, sexism, classism, and genderism. Morrison first establishes many similarities between Sorrow and the Yoruba God(s) of Creation, which is Twoness. Many African cultures share a belief in twoness, or the understanding that reality comprises two aspects that are interdependent and interconnected (i.e., spirit/matter, visible/invisible, male/female, good/evil, essence/existence (Babatunde Lawal, 24). Twoness is also associated with balance. The Yoruba believe that the number two influences the

supernatural to bring out a desired result. In *A Mercy*, Sorrow embodies multiple expressions of twoness. In the opening lines of her narrative, Sorrow reflects, “She did not mind when they called her Sorrow so long as Twin kept using her real name” which is Captain (111). Her two names, one masculine and one feminine, not only connote the duality necessary for life, but also the female/male characteristics of the Supreme Creator, Olódumarè (male) or Odudua (female) that she embodies. The Yoruba Creation myth shares this concept of twoness, which they symbolize through the cosmological concept of the drinking gourd. According to Yoruba myths, the cosmological gourd was self-contained and had all the matter in it that was necessary to create human life. While the top half signifies maleness, the sky/heaven where all of the invisible spirits live, the bottom half represents femaleness and the primeval waters out of which the physical world was created. However, in some creation myths, Odudua (female) is first seen as the Supreme Creator, not Olódumarè. The duality in belief systems might be what led Yoruba people to view the Supreme Creator as an androgynous, two-sided being, capable of both female/male traits, and mischief/blessings.

Sorrow, much like the Supreme Being, seems androgynous too, at least to the characters around her. The woman who rescues Sorrow from the sea, remarks: “We thought from your clothes you were a lad,” but the abuse she suffers from “goings that took place behind the stack of clapboard,” and her continual state of pregnancy indicate that she has female properties, too (Morrison 114). The Captain and the sawyer’s wife dress her as a boy. She even operates along these lines in *A Mercy*. Morrison describes Sorrow’s tendency to sleep by the fire every night, and reminisce about the waters where she is from – the Fon conceptualization of their Supreme Deity, Mawu-Lisa, as both male and female in essence. Its most sacred symbol is a closed calabash, like that of the Yoruba. The top half of the calabash symbolizes Lisa, the male Heaven,

associated with day, heat, fire, fatherhood, and virility. The bottom half signifies Mawu, the female Earth, associated with night, coolness, water, fertility, motherhood, generosity, and nurture.

In *A Mercy*, Twin also signifies the concept of duality, or twoness. Twin and Sorrow represent the Yoruba belief that physically, twins are two separate people, but spiritually they are one. Sorrow will “quit any chore and follow her identical self” (111); she wanders off whenever Twin wants company, to talk, or play. Twin even instructs Sorrow not to answer certain questions, or how to answer certain questions. When the sawyer’s wife attempts to ask her questions about who she is and where she is from, Twin whispers “NO.” Twin and Sorrow are interconnected and interdependent: one cannot leave the other behind. In this manner, Morrison connotes that Twin is more than a Doppelgänger – she is a divine act of self-extension that Sorrow created for companionship once she became shipwrecked in the physical realm. Her ability to manifest phenomenon suggests that she is a sexually biune Goddess (26). Both Sorrow and Twin necessitate the other’s presence. If one should die, there must be a ritual performed to maintain the spiritual connection between the living and the dead (i.e., the spiritual and the natural realm). Yoruba practitioners must hold special honorific rituals for twins if one should pass to maintain this sacred connection. Here, the concept of duality and twoness are integrally connected to life and death, which Morrison conceptualizes when Sorrow has her daughter.

Based on Morrison’s depiction of Sorrow, she seems to be the Oduduwa, Supreme Creator of the Yoruba Orisha Tradition, that is incomplete, yet undergoing a Divine journey to achieve completion, or humanity. At first, when Sorrow answers “Mermaids” to the question of how she got on land, she seems crazy to the people asking. However, her response indicates that she is a divine creation from the primeval waters of the Cosmic Gourd, which represents

femaleness and the primeval waters out of which the physical world was later created. Similar to the Egyptian waters of Nun, they are turbulent, chaotic, dark, unformed, and boundless. Morrison depicts the water's chaotic nature through imagery showing the capsized boat, stranded Sorrow and Twin, and the absence of life. In the Yoruba Creation Myth, Deities, Spirits, and Gods are responsible for creating, forming, and shaping material life. Their divine charge is to form nature and humans. In the Cosmic Gourd creation myth, "Olódumarè (the Supreme God) instructed the artist deity Obatala to mold anthropomorphic images from clay, to animate each image with a life force (emi) and then asked the newly created humans to go and inhabit the land below the sky" (Lawala). This is Sorrow's mission: as a Goddess, she must bring life into the material realm.

But as Morrison suggests, she does not know how yet. As a biune, Supreme goddess, she has the power and potential to create any kind of life in any realm, but she only understands how to create life in her own image. She creates Twin just for her benefit. She creates herself (i.e., Captain) too, but she has not determined how to use her own powers and potential to serve humanity. Her prophetic dreams "of the thousandfold men walking the waves, singing wordlessly," (116) longing for land, yet not quite able to get there allude not only to Earth's ecomemory of the Atlantic Slave trade, and the ancestral souls that live there, but also Sorrow's Divine purpose to merge the spiritual realm with the material realm in honor of this ancestral lore. Lawala clarifies how this process functions to unify all aspects of the cosmos in a life preserving process:

a belief in the self as an interface of spirit and matter has encouraged [Yoruba] not to accept death as the end of life. Instead, they view it as a separation of the inner (spiritual) from the outer (material) self, resulting in a translocation from physical to metaphysical

existence--a kind of afterlife (Ehin-Iwa), where a dematerialized soul may choose to stay forever or reincarnate as children in the same family (Lawal 1977). To the Yoruba, this ability of the soul to reincarnate in a new body--a work of art by the creativity deity Obatala--reveals the divinity that abides in humanity. (37)

Sorrow's imbalance resides in her inability to respect humanity, nature, and the material world. And so she devalues it – she makes a hasty generalization that the all of the Earth is “mean, hard, thick, hateful;” she convinces herself that she doesn't need “friendships,” or camaraderie, and thus she rejects solidarity. But the more community members show her kindness, like the Blacksmith who heals her, like Captain, and the Sawyer's Sons,” the more she is equipped to view both sides of humanity in a balanced way – the more she understands what being human means. It is not all good, like an autonomous Spirit World filled with laughter and play, but it is not all bad either.

In the scene in *A Mercy* where Sorrow remarks that the house is in disarray, the foxes are eating the chicken eggs, and goats are wandering off, she acknowledges that she is equally a part of the problem. Before, she would have used Twin as an excuse to get out doing hard labor. It is this initiation that spurs her water to break. In finding solidarity with Lena, with Mistress, with the disorganized environment, she learns how to fully value the beauty in the human condition. Because she has shown wisdom, understanding, and the capacity to use her knowledge ethically to honor her community, Sorrow has proven ready to be a mother to a daughter.

Conclusion

Ecowomanism also understands all Earthlings to be interconnected and interdependent, a concept that African people refer to (in many different languages) as *wholeness*, or *oneness*. For African people, it is important to note that the universe comprises three realms, not just that

which people can see: the spiritual (ancestors, gods, deities), the metaphysical (divinations/intuition/dreams), and the physical (nature, manmade environments, and natural environments). This means that all things – seen and unseen; animate and inanimate; physical and spiritual – are all connected in a delicate, harmonious balance. Whatever humans do to one realm of the universe or one part of earth will manifest in other parts. For African people, this delicate balance means life and all living things are sacred, endowed with Spirit, and worthy of protection. According to Yoruba cosmology, each realm – Spiritual, Natural, and Human – must reciprocate and reflect the others. The Yoruba believe whatever the Spirit conceives, so should it manifest in the Natural World, and in the Human world; in return, humans have an ethical responsibility to reciprocate this divine transference of spiritual energy by passing it back along to the Spiritual, Natural, and Human realms through their actions, thoughts, and words (i.e., prayers, veneration, rituals, etc.). In this process, no energy is ever created or destroyed; it is only transferred from one dimension to the next. It is reifying to see how African Cosmology has conceptualized this principle since time immemorial. Europeans later termed this Divine Order, the Law of Conservation of Energy.

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CHAPTER FOUR: SICKNESS, HEALING, AND SELF-RECOVERY IN EDWIDGE

DANTICAT'S, *BREATH, EYES, MEMORY*

People of African descent have relentlessly fought against colonialism and the systemic oppressions it engenders. During the Atlantic Slave Trade, European powers attempted to shackle the African body and mind, yet our spirit would not – and will never – yield. This tenacity of African spirit performs a critical role among members of the diaspora, not only as an indelible source of power from which we, Black people, draw to navigate systemic oppressions, but also as a necessary paradigm scholars use to develop a more wholistic understanding of our experiences as direct descendants of the larger African collective. In the introduction of *Literary Expressions of African Spirituality*, Carol P. Marsh-Lockett and Elizabeth J. West, define African spiritual memory as, “a common theme directly traceable back to Africa, an element that, in its broadest sense, shares characteristics with the essence of African religious beliefs and accompanying cultural practices” (2). Based on this definition, the essence of African spiritual memory, or *asili*, provides scholars with a kaleidoscopic depth of vision they can use to explore and reflect upon the intellectual creativity produced by members of the diaspora. This observation is especially valid for literature written by African diasporic women. Women writers of African descent share a long history of orating and writing their experiences, adding to the shared body of spiritual memory that unifies them with the larger African diaspora. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Edwidge Danticat imbues her novel with the divine essence (*asili*) of African spiritual memory, intermingling its restorative powers with the troubled colonial landscape of Haiti and the trauma the Caco women face; as a result, Danticat’s novel epitomizes a unique

African Rites of Passage that aligns with the Kongo cosmogram and the *Maat-Sankofa* process Marimba Ani introduces in the late 1990s. Through this syncretic writing style, Danticat emphasizes how women of African descent harness the power of spiritual memory to overcome socio-cultural barriers, intersectional oppression, and more importantly, to heal the intergenerational wounds these constructs engender.

By aligning her narrative structure with an African concept of time, the Caco women epitomize the sacredness engrained in African Rites of Passage, which necessitate spiritual wholeness, or peace. Each woman must reconcile her traumatic colonial past with an unyielding present in order to create a future where they once again thrive. To illustrate how Danticat structures her novel according to the Kongo cosmogram, I refer to Fu-Kiau Kia Bunseki. As one of the most distinguished scholars of African culture, and a native of Kinshasa, Dr. Fu-Kiau is most well-known for theorizing Kongo Cosmology. As a native of Kinshasa and an *Initiated One*, Dr. Fu-Kiau has both experiential and cultural insight alongside academic interest in Kongo Cosmology. According to Dr. Fu-Kiau, there are significant concepts and characteristics of the Kongo cosmogram that correlate with African cosmology as a whole:

First, there are four realms of time the Bakongo recognize: cosmic, natural, vital, and social time (Fu-Kiau 22). Cosmic time refers to the unlimited and ongoing formation process of *dunga* (events) in the universe, which are made possible via the power and energy of the supreme force, or Kalunga. In short, “. . . cosmic time represents the actual, ongoing, active timeline of kalunga energy and its "dams" . . .or new creations throughout the universe through the instrumentality of Kalunga's power, the agent of change and creation (Fu-Kiau 22). According to the Bakongo, everything in the universe must undergo the cosmic time process to come into being, or complete its formation process. This process necessitates four stages of transformation, known as *Musoni*

time, *Kala* time, *Tukula* time, and *Luvemba* time (22). Each of these stages of transformation appear in Edwidge Danticat’s novel. In fact, by tracing these distinct features within the pages of her novel, readers witness a unique rite of passage that each Caco woman must undergo to achieve a healthy self-identity. (See figure 2 below)

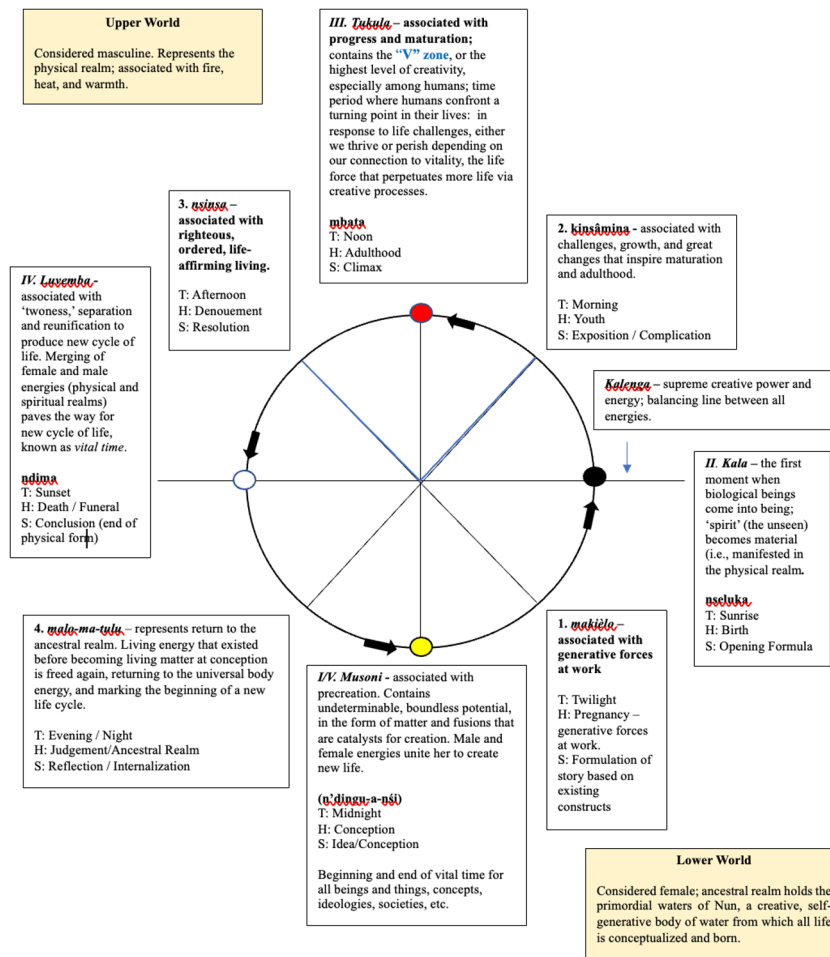


Figure 2: K.K. Bunseki Fu-Kiau, *Kongo Hourly Time Segmentation System, Kongo Cosmogram* aligns with African rite of passage, 1994

The first similarity between Danticat’s novel and the Kongo cosmogram is the cyclical nature of time. In reference to time, Fu-Kiau asserts that “time is cyclical, and all creations, institutions, and systems undergo a four-stage cyclical process [that] has social relevance for the Bakongo” (20). Accordingly, time has no beginning and no end. It is both abstract and concrete.

“It exists on its own and flows by itself, on its own accord” (21). Among the Bantu-Kongo, time only becomes measurable and understandable thanks to *dunga*, or events. These *dunga* can be natural, artificial, ideological, biological, material, immaterial, et cetera (21). Because time is a fluid concept (abstract), yet understandable through events (concrete), the Bantu-Kongo refer to these events as *n'kama mia ntang*, or the dams of time (21). In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat mirrors the cyclicity of time via the spiritual memory that unifies the Caco women, and the life-altering dams of time (events) that shape each woman. In *Literary Expressions*, Carol P. Marsh-Lockett and Elizabeth J. West define African spirituality as “a common theme directly related back to Africa” (1). These themes come from many African influences, such as religions and cultural beliefs. This spirit (*asili*) shapes and lends meaning to African / African diasporic people’s lives. Danticat especially typifies this enduring spirit through religious syncretism that each Caco woman interpolates in her own way. For example, Granmè Ifé is a practicing Protestant, yet her particular practice merges elements of Voodoo with Christianity.

Tante Atie, on the other hand, adopts the African practice of storytelling, especially as a didactic tool to pass along wisdom and valuable lessons to Sophie as she grows into an adolescent. Martine, Sophie’s mother, sends cassette tapes home to Haiti to maintain her familial connection with Sophie (her daughter), Tante Atie (her sister) and Granmè Ifé (her mother). Sophie, as the recipient of Tante Atie’s stories, an heir to her mother’s immigrant status, and Granmè Ifé’s granddaughter, remains attached to her African spiritual roots via memory and her retelling of the Caco women’s stories. Danticat’s portrayal of spiritual memory as a generational heirloom passed from one generation of Caco woman to the next mimics the cyclicity of the Kongo cosmogram.

Although time is a fluid concept within the Kongo cosmogram, as stated earlier, it becomes measurable through “n’kama mia ntang,” or dams of time, i.e., events (Fu-Kiau 21). These events play a significant role in human development as they mark important moments of transition for all beings. These events can be thought of as disruptions that occur to the cyclical nature of time. These disruptions can be political, ideological, ceremonial, mundane, etcetera. A cycle of time continues until another collision stops it, making way for a new beginning, or motion, to start. As Fu-Kiau explains, “time itself is worthless, but the dams are not” (31). Danticat mimics this concept of time through life altering events that disrupt each Caco woman’s ‘cycle of time’ (concept of self), thereby transitioning each woman into a new phase of identity formation.

In Danticat’s novel, the tradition of testing is the most significant event, or dam of time, for it is through this practice that each Caco woman becomes defined and must navigate to define herself. Although the origins of testing are not clear, Danticat certainly notes that Protestant ideals of chastity, virginal innocence, and sexual purity dictate each woman’s self-perception and feelings of worth. Martine’s rape symbolizes another prominent dam of time within the novel, specifically because it disrupts their initial way of being and understanding themselves, setting in motion a new, destructive phase of time that manifests as intergenerational trauma. For Martine and Tante Atie, virginity and chastity are ideological and physical expectations by which they have learned to define themselves. Granmè Ifé’s continuation of testing solidifies this fact. Martine’s rape not only disrupts this previous sexual identity through which she has defined her existence, but it also forces her to come to terms with a new, unwanted social identity as a young mother with an ‘out-of-wedlock,’ fatherless child. On top of these new, intersecting identities, Martine becomes an exile when Granmè Ifé sends her away while she is pregnant to work for a

rich mulatto family. Finally, she adopts an immigrant status when she moves to New York in an effort to escape her traumatic past in Haiti.

Sophie leaving Haiti is another significant dam of time as it disrupts the innocence of her childhood identity. The mother-daughter bond Sophie shares with her Tante Atie characterizes her childhood perception of love and belonging, which seems to be healthy, cohesive, stable. However, Martine's request that Sophie live with her in New York disrupts Sophie's positive conception of childhood in Haiti, which is the only life she has ever known. This new cycle of time brings with it new identities that she, too, like her mother, must all of the sudden navigate: the fact that she is forced to leave makes her an exile, in a sense, and an immigrant by legal standards. Because Sophie is 12 when Martine sends for her, this critical moment – in tandem with her mother's continuation of testing – scars Sophie in similar ways as it does for her mother. Sophie's forced departure from Haiti not only represents a new cycle of time for Sophie, but also for Tante Atie. As stated previously, Tante Atie and Sophie share an intricately interconnected bond, which makes them very codependent upon one another. While this intertwined, interdependent connection is common in mother-daughter bonds, any separation between the two can be seen as a disruption to this initial relationship. Because Sophie has been with Tante Atie since she was a baby, Martine's request that Sophie be with her in New York is a rupture to their timeline. While each Caco woman finds solidarity through shared aspects of African spirituality, Danticat emphasizes that intergenerational trauma unifies them, too. As colonized subjects, each woman must contend with intersecting oppressions that degrade her social status, and by proxy, her quality of life.

According to the Bakongo, everything must undergo the cosmic time process to come into being. For humans to come into being, and thereby maintain order, balance, and peace, they

must be in communion with every force of the universe (i.e., natural, cosmic, vital, and social). To honor and remember their accountability in this sacred circle of life, many African communities perform rites of passage imbued with this spiritual memory, which is essentially what makes rituals so divine. African rites of passage and embedded rituals transmit this age-old wisdom – the cyclical nature of life – to future generations. Professor Paul Kyalo asserts that there are many different reasons African people use rituals, and he categorizes them in two different ways:

(1) as rites which are linked to the human life cycle: namely, beginning of life (birth), marriage, and human crises, e.g., illness and end of life (death); and (2) as rites connected to fixed events, which can be either yearly or historical events. In the African context, the rituals connect us to our ancestors and therefore give meaning to our existence. . .Rituals help us individually and communally to make sense of life's transition, providing some structure to ease movement from the familiar to the unknown. (36)

Kyalo's definition of rites and their uses correspond with the four stages of transformation associated with the Kongo cosmogram. Most notably, all aspects of life – albeit spiritual or physical – consist of endless conceptions, births, transformations, and rebirths. Nothing ever dies in the Bakongo worldview, which they express in the saying, "*tufwanga mu soba*" — we die in order to undergo change" (Fu-Kiau 27). By situating the Caco women within the Kongo cosmogram's 'ebb and flow' of time, Danticat sets in motion her own unique African rite of passage, one that acknowledges women of African descent and their experiences as both colonial subjects and spiritual beings.

The first stage of transformation is *Musoni* time, which includes *makièlo* time. According to Fu-Kiau, every being (idea, social construct, animal, person, etc.) begins life within this transformation stage. This stage corresponds to the human life cycle and rite of passage associated with preconception and pregnancy. In a cosmic sense, it represents the beginning of time, during which the emptiness of the universe was filled with magnetic, boiling, chaotic matter. Out of this chaotic matter, the ‘collision of collisions’ (big bang) occurs. During this period, after the universe completes its collisions and its cooling process, the earth . . . became a physical reality, and the first known dawn of time (Fu-Kiau 23). Together, *Musoni* time and *makièlo* time signify precreation wherein all pre-existing, intangible matter and generative forces are at work in the process of conceptualizing new, physical life. In the natural, spiritual, and physical forces of the human life cycle, it simultaneously operates as the end of life (death), the beginning of life (conception), and the life-giving properties of ancestral energy (rebirth). Because “nothing exists that does not follow the steps of the cyclical cosmogram,” even manmade conceptions, like ideas also begin here, die here, and undergo rebirth in the *Musoni* stage. And, like all other natural life forms, these ideas have the potential to reappear (are reborn) as physical manifestations that influence every realm of the universe (spiritual, physical, natural, social). In a metaphorical sense, Danticat establishes white supremacy and African Cosmology as the ‘starting point of all life,’ for her novel. In so doing, she effectively illustrates these pre-existing worldviews have the potential to shape the lives of all physical, spiritual, and natural phenomena. However, while white supremacy promotes difference, imbalance, separation, and fragmentation, African spirituality promotes balance and harmony among all things. In keeping with African spiritual wisdom, Danticat emphasizes that cosmological harmony and balance help humans establish more effective, healthier relationships. Within *Musoni* time, energy moves

freely, and thus, has the potential to create ‘dysfunction’ or harmony, depending on the way humans tap into this creative source. Hence, the ultimate goal for the Caco women is to maneuver aspects of both worldviews to create a ‘good,’ or wholistic way of living. This divine charge is harder than it seems, as each character struggles to operate under the weight of white supremacy. As a result, women of African descent must continuously strive to balance these conflicting ideals: on the one hand, each woman must navigate the dichotomizing violence of white supremacy, patriarchy, sexism, and colonialism. On the other hand, as Haitian women have been shaped by ancestral wisdom – yet elongated from said wisdom through white supremacist ideals and in flux dominant ideologies – they have varying degrees of access to the healing essence embedded within African spirituality and Haitian Voudou. As in the *Musoni* phase of transformation, both of these worldviews simultaneously exist as social constructs; therefore, they interact, mingle, and/or coalesce to inform how aspects of each worldview will manifest within each woman’s life. Depending on each woman’s proximity to her own African heritage, Danticat unveils that these warring ideals have the potential to manifest physically in destructive and deadly ways.

While Danticat incorporates aspects of *Musoni* time to demonstrate that both white supremacy and African cosmology exist simultaneously as influential factors in the conception of human life, she implements aspects of *Kala time* and *kinsâmina* to symbolize how these worldviews manifest in the material realm among women of African descent. As Fu-Kiau describes, *Kala time* and *kinsâmina* are associated with physical birth and socialization processes that define adulthood identities. *Kala time* correlates with birth because it begins after the *Musoni* ‘cooling off’ period and marks the first point in time when microscopic beings came into existence, thanks to the fecundity of moist soils and the abundance of water, which could be

found everywhere (24). During this time, the sun rises from the depths of the lower world, or the ancestral realm, bringing light to the upper world, or the physical realm (24). With that light, the sun also brought hope, joy, and creative energy to the physical realm (24). All biological beings come into existence during this stage, which endows the *Kala time* and *kinsâmina* with important social significance (24). In a spiritual context, *Kala time* refers to the first moment that life from the spiritual realm enters the physical, which happens through speech or birth. Like birth, speech symbolizes life because words become tangible reality in the same manner that the intangible processes that occur during preconception and conception materialize to produce a baby.

Furthermore, in terms of rites, words are critical aspects of the socialization process, which marks the transitional period the Bakongo denote as *kinsâmina*. This stage corresponds with puberty and adolescence, or *growth*. External forces and factors spur changes, which compels all beings to adapt or respond to their environment. For the Caco women, the words they inherit through ancestral lore, to the words they hear from external sources that discredit this lore, to the thoughts they think privately, to the words they hear from others, and finally, to those that they speak all shape their identities. Women of African descent do not live in a vacuum. The constant state of change that all beings must navigate characterizes this stage of transformation, reiterating the socialization processes that define one's self-identity during this rite of passage. In the Kongo cosmogram, socialization is a communal process: it cannot be completed without participation from all aspects of the universe. This stage of transformation is considered the most critical time period of the human life cycle because it lays the foundation for who an individual will become in adulthood – depending on how a person is socialized, s/he can become a destructive force or a procreative force. While this stage of transformation is intended to transition adolescent girls and boys from youth to adulthood, Danticat indicates that this is not

the case for many youths of African descent. In fact, many of them undergo socialization processes, but because these processes are rooted in white supremacy and dominant discourses, the processes themselves are dysfunctional and fragmentary at best. As a result, young girls of African descent are more susceptible to displaying symptoms of dysfunctional socialization, which manifest as tangible sicknesses.

Like the rest of the Caco women in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie suffers from what Franz Fanon terms neurosis of colonialism, wherein racially colonized subjects develop psychological and spiritual illnesses as a result of internalized white supremacist ideals and subsequent discourses of domination (51). From the time Sophie moves to New York with her mother, and well into her adult years, Sophie manifests several neuroses that scar her permanently. She develops social anxiety, which could have many causes: racial, ethnic, and cultural discrimination at school; newfound Haitian immigrant status makes her a target for denigrating stereotypes; European standards of beauty that are so clearly anti-Black; and, as a Haitian immigrant, she is all of the sudden keenly aware of her working-class status that now becomes defined through labor. In response to male dominated patriarchy, sexism, classism, and genderism and, Sophie develops several other neuroses. Martine, Sophie's mother, constantly pressures her to be successful; however, her mother's unreasonable expectations lead to biological weathering that push Sophie into depression and anxiety. The conversation Martine, Marc, and young Sophie have during dinner unveil the high expectations Martine and Marc are already imposing on her. The fact that Martine keeps speaking for Sophie, despite the fact that she is old enough to speak for herself, juxtaposes the healthy assertiveness Sophie shows when speaking with Tante Atie. Marc's emphasis on male-female relationships automatically precludes that Sophie identifies as heterosexual, a bias that dissuades her from other sexual

identities. His comments also reflect European beauty standards to be thin. Even Martine routinely uses bleaching cream to lighten her complexion. When Marc asks Sophie what she wants to be when she grows up, Sophie responds that she wants to be a secretary. Neither Marc, nor Martine seem impressed with her career choice. Marc encourages her to reconsider, while her mother responds, “She is too young to know now. You are going to be doctor” (Danticat 54). Earlier in this scene, Marc comments, “Food is a luxury . . .but we cannot allow ourselves to become gluttons or get fat” (54).

Towards the end of the dinner, Marc asks Sophie whether or not she has a boyfriend, her mother does not even give Sophie a chance to speak. Immediately she asserts, “[s]he is not going to be running around like those American girls. She will have a boyfriend when she is 18” (Danticat 54). Martine’s expectations reflect the sexist assumptions that girls and women should be chaste and virginal until they get married. Her mother acts out these expectations by ‘testing’ Sophie (155). As previously stated, testing is a practice that Granmè Ifé has inherited from her mother, and has passed on to her daughters, Atie and Martine. Now, Martine has passed this practice on to Sophie. While this practice may be attached to the syncretic Protestantism Granmè Ifé practices, it may also have roots in traditional African practices, too. As Granmè Ifé explains, “the mother is responsible for [the daughter’s] purity” because “if [the mother] gives a soiled daughter to her husband, he can shame [the] family, speak evil of [the mother], [or] even bring [the daughter] back to [the mother] (155). This description mirrors the emphasis many African cultures placed on women’s sexuality. Typically, this emphasis is strongly tied to control over women’s fertility; however, with the introduction of colonialism and Western forms of Christianity and Catholicism, many African cultures began placing emphasis on women’s purity and chastity as these values reflected the imagery of Mary, the virginal mother.

As testing may have origins in traditional African practices and/or have origins in Western religious practices, Danticat's criticism of male dominated patriarchy seems shared across both worldviews – and rightfully so. During testing, Sophie would “double . . . [she] would close her eyes and imagine all the pleasant things that [she] had known” (155). As a result of the testing, she develops an aversion to sex, as demonstrated with her struggle to be intimate with Joseph, her husband. She doubles even then. While doubling seems to get her through these moments, it is actually a type of neurosis as well, but it is unique to people of African descent. W.E.B. Du Bois coined the term *double-consciousness* in 1903, describing it as:

this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others . . . [o]ne ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (“Of Our Spiritual Strivings”)

While Du'Bois' excerpt reiterates the issues people of African descent face establishing a cohesive, healthy self-identity under the weight of racism, it further resonates with Sophie's struggle to build a wholistic self-identity that affirms her sexuality, her Haitian and American identity, and her understanding of womanhood as it intersects with her status as a mother and wife.

As all ideological concepts operate fluidly in the African worldview, doubling does not always produce fragmentation; it can lead to self-awareness, but for a beneficial outcome, one must have a healthy sense of *self* to begin with. Hugo Letiche states, “Doubling can be enabling as reflexivity, self-awareness, and dialogic intensity . . . [i]f doubling creates space to be oneself and to affirm "one's own," then it can be understood as escape from external authority, repression and unfreedom” (9). In Sophie's case, doubling is purely an escape from reality. While Danticat

demonstrates that Sophie is indeed being initiated into adulthood, i.e., undergoing socialization processes, the lack of communal guidance and ancestral wisdom prevent her from actually achieving full personhood. In the African worldview, an individual cannot achieve full personhood outside of her or his community. Typically, African rites of puberty do entail isolating pubescent girls and boys from their communities, but members of the community who have reached full adulthood or elder status provide in-depth guidance pertaining to achieving this status. These instructions include knowledge about laws, taboos, marital duties, and the ways in which the community functions as a whole. Even more importantly, these initiation rites provide historical knowledge about the ancestral beings, goddesses and gods who once lived on Earth before humans arrived (Kyalo 40).

While Sophie does have guidance from Martine, in the African worldview, Martine has not achieved adulthood or elder status because she has not gone through socialization in commune with her entire community either. In short, she is not qualified to guide Sophie just yet. She needs healing first, and this can only happen through community engagement and ancestral wisdom, which Granmè Ifé severed after Martine was raped by sending her away from the family. Shortly afterwards, Martine leaves for New York in an effort to escape the traumatic events of her life in Haiti, leaving Sophie behind. She leaves them all behind and carves a new identity, but it is incomplete because she does not take into consideration *all* of the events that have shaped her; likewise, she is extremely alienated from the spiritual wisdom embedded in Haitian culture.

She adopts predominately Eurocentric worldviews, and in tandem with an unhealed traumatic past, she passes this legacy of pain and loneliness onto Sophie. Therefore, rather than producing an adult who can withstand both the ills of white supremacy and the intergenerational

trauma of the past, Martine inadvertently produces an unhealthy 18-year-old, as demonstrated in her inability to self-articulate. By the time she is in college, at the age of 18, she is still living solely by her mother's expectations. She is a slave to what her mother wants, and consequently, her mother's expectations become her "great responsibility" (64); so, instead of making her own decisions, "daring to dream on her own," (69) and learning from these experiences, "[she] spent six years doing nothing but that [what her mother expects]. School, home, and prayer" (64).

The societal pressures Martine imposes on Sophie not only isolate her, but they also fail to socialize her in a way that prepares her for adulthood in a healthy, wholistic way. Through her metaphorical comparison of Sophie's dysfunctional adulthood to the third stage of transformation, *Tukula time*, Danticat solidifies that women of African descent must maintain their connection to African spiritual memory in order to cope with intersecting oppressions and the dysfunctional, self-hating narratives they engender. Symbolically, this stage of transformation represents the peak of creativity for all beings; it is the climax of all beings' experiences. In a social context, this transformation stage entails the culmination of human experiences, or the events that define one's life force or self-identify. Where *Kala* time refers to the socialization processes that go into developing the individual, *Tukula time* and *nsinsa* represent self-articulation, or the outcome of these socialization processes. Hence, this stage corresponds with the human life cycle and rites of passage, adulthood. Adulthood, in the African worldview comes with certain social expectations that humans are expected to fulfill, such as maturity, marriage, procreation, and prosperity. Fu-Kiau asserts that this time period is the most critical time zone for human beings because those who do not understand how to use their creative energy (life-force) for prosperity are "doomed to fail" (25). To clarify, life-force and energy in the African worldview refers to the ancestral and experiential memory African people

have passed down from one generation to the next. This experiential wisdom is specifically designed to transition people of African descent through each stage of life.

A more important observation Danticat emphasizes through her metaphorical representation of *Tukula time and nsinsa*, is the necessity for truth among people of African descent. While *Tukula* time represents adulthood in the African worldview, age itself is not a determinant in adulthood status (“Rites of Adulthood”): to become a true adult, humans must consciously come to accept who they currently are, who they want to be, and the type of legacy they want to create. As biological beings, humans will necessarily experience turbulence and chaos, which will unquestionably initiate changes to their lives, their thought processes, their behaviors et cetera. However, despite the turbulent, chaotic, and beautiful nature of cyclic time, humans must first accept that these factors are inevitable, unavoidable aspects of life, and second, they must uphold the moral ethical code of organizing all of those turbulent, chaotic, and beautiful experiences into a life-affirming lifestyle.

In order for humans to create a life-affirming lifestyle, they must truthfully and honestly acknowledge how all of their experiences from past events have shaped who they are presently; they need to honestly consider whether these experiences – and the way they are responding to them – are shaping them into the creative force they actually want to be. It is very important to note that while socialization processes (turbulence, chaos, beauty) have the power to shape the individual, the individual likewise has the power to decide how much s/he is shaped by these processes, and how to enforce the experiential knowledge they gain from these processes moving forward. For women of African descent, then, adulthood remains a critical moment in their lives; they, too, like all humans, must decide who they are, who they want to be, and the type of legacy they want to leave behind.

However, as colonial subjects, women of African descent face many obstacles in making this decision. Their status as descendants of slaves alienates them from their cultural roots and the experiential wisdom embedded within. As a result of this spiritual elongation from their own cultural roots, Black women often struggle to access this well of knowledge. As Melanie Harris states, women of African descent get partial bits and pieces of this knowledge, or they get distorted, fragmented renditions. Either way, this ancestral knowledge lies within, but accessing it under the weight of intersecting oppressions and elongated spiritual ties often leaves women of African descent misguided. As a result, this decision – as simple as it may seem – becomes very difficult to make. Sophie typifies the validity of this observation. Because she has become so ostracized from the healing stories Tante Atie used to tell her, she eventually collapses under the weight of white supremacist ideals, which her mother signifies. Suffering from an extreme bout of depression and anxiety, Sophie self mutilates herself in a desperate effort to fail the testing so that her mother can stop performing the invasive practice. This act marks a pivotal moment for Sophie. Although her decision seemingly resembles the desired outcome of autonomy associated with African rites of adulthood, which are marked by physical changes to the body (circumcision, piercings, clitorrectomy), she is not actually autonomous – she is abandoned. While Sophie achieves liberation from testing, and initiates the next rite of passage, she is forced to do so at the expense of her relationship with her mother. Just as Granmè Ifé exiled Martine after she was raped for fear that the family would be disgraced, so too does Martine exile Sophie. She kicks Sophie out of the house, once again abandoning her, but this time, Sophie has no elder guidance to segue her next step into adulthood, which is marriage.

Although Sophie goes through the physical motions of marriage and does indeed love Joseph, Danticat demonstrates that this final stage of adulthood was forced onto her too soon. To

begin, African rites of marriage do not assume that love will be enough to sustain a long-term marriage. Professor Manu Ampim asserts that in Western societies, “a vast number of marriages fail as they are often solely based upon the couple ‘falling in love’ and thereby entering the relationship in an unbalanced state” (“Rite of Marriage”). Ampim’s statement rings true: Sophie is certainly head over heels for Joseph, but her feelings for him quite possibly could be a residual effect of her lack of experience with men. Joseph is the first and only man that Sophie knows. However, Joseph on the other hand demonstrates certainty about who he is, seems to understand Sophie, but ultimately, his attraction to her seems very rooted in patriarchy and gender expectations. Danticat hints at the fact that Sophie is not prepared for this next phase of adulthood, which is marriage, via her rushed decision to get married. As soon as Martine exiles Sophie for failing the testing, Sophie runs to Joseph seeking a sense of security she lacks from her mother.

Therefore, Sophie’s initiation into marriage begins on shaky grounds, which Danticat once more suggests. Because Sophie is far too elongated from her Haitian community and the experiential knowledge encoded therein, she becomes misguided. Her geographical distance from Tante Atie’s healing stories, alongside the absence of her Haitian community, and more recently, her mother, signify that she has become very alienated from the spiritual ‘life-force’ that all women of African descent require in order to formulate healthy coping mechanisms as they navigate new identities and roles in their adult lives. In many African customs, marriage is a sacred event, and as such, many rituals are prepared for both the bride and groom to teach them the wisdom they will need to be effective partners for one another. Sophie does not have access to any of this knowledge: her mother cannot aid her because she is still hurting from her own trauma. Tante Atie and Granmè Ifé are distant voices of her past that she cannot access – plus,

the girlhood memories and stories Tante Atie left with her are no longer enough to prepare her for the rigors of marriage. In the African worldview, this absence of community signifies the absence of experiential wisdom that potentially could empower Sophie in her newfound role as a wife. Because she cannot access this spiritual memory to process her trauma, however, she develops self-harming coping mechanisms that place her at risk of becoming a negative, harmful force to her daughter.

Although Sophie marries, she has not come to a full reconciliation with past events that have shaped her, and as a result, her marriage is imbalanced. Under the staggering weight of sexual and gender expectations, the fact that she develops bulimia shortly after she marries is not surprising. Danticat demonstrates that Sophie cares for Joseph and their relationship more than he seems to care about her wellbeing, which contradicts the wholistic unity associated with marriage in the African worldview. Professor Ampim clarifies that rites of marriage are intended to unify husband and wife as one whole so both can achieve their individual missions and goals (“Rite of Marriage”). African rites of marriage are also communal affairs; it involves both the bride’s family and the groom’s family, which clearly is not the case with this couple. After being exiled, Sophie does not speak with her mother until years later, and certainly, this absence, along with Tante Atie’s, Haiti, and Granmè Ifé’s, is a major component in her journey towards healing. In fact, Danticat implies that Joseph primarily values Sophie for being a mother, providing him sexual pleasure, and domestic labor. When Sophie returns from Haiti, Joseph barely acknowledges her. Before she can even get out of the car, Joseph is tapping on the car window trying to get Brigitte’s attention; Sophie has to remind Joseph that she is there, asking him whether she gets a hug, too; he leaves Sophie outside by the car to carry in her own bags while

he runs into the house with Brigitte; when she asks if he missed her, he responds, “Sometimes” (197-198).

The house is not clean, either, indicating that Sophie is the one who does all of the housekeeping and cooking. When Sophie smells the sheets for another woman’s scent, the implication is that Joseph has had, or has been having an affair during their relationship. While Joseph claims he is being understanding of Sophie’s sexual phobia, his actions show otherwise. As Sophie gets settled from her trip to Haiti, he dismissively asks, “Did you find an aphrodisiac?” The overemphasis he places on the physical manifestations of the disorder rather than the causes indicates that he is not prioritizing her healing. Sophie asserts that what she needs from him is “a little more understanding,” but because Joseph is only concerned about his own sexual gratification, he dismisses her disorder stating, “I do understand. You’re usually reluctant to start, but after a while, you give in. You seem to enjoy it” (198). Therein lies the problem. His sexual needs and manhood seem to come at a cost to her own wellbeing, which should not be the case. Later that night, Joseph initiates sex with Sophie. She doubles just to get through intercourse, and then shortly after, has a bulimic episode. In a similar way, Martine’s domineering expectations took precedence over Sophie’s wellbeing.

The struggle to find balance between warring, divergent identities leave Sophie nearly shattered, but not quite. Through her metaphorical representation of *Luvemba time* and *malo-matulu*, the final stage of transformation on the Kongo cosmogram, Danticat takes Sophie through the final rite of passage, *death*, which for Sophie entails healing and self-recovery. Through this final stage, Danticat indicates that Sophie must be reborn in order to reconcile the weight of her past traumas with her current and future prosperity. In reference to the human life cycle, this final stage of transformation represents *death, reflection, and rebirth (or rejuvenation)*. In the

Bakongo worldview, nothing ever dies. Their saying, “*tufwanga mu soba*” – we die in order to undergo change – reveals that Death is a necessary and sacred part of life because it is a catalyst for transformation (Fu-Kiau 27). Fu-Kiau clarifies that death can be a biological event, or it can be a process that “permits life to flow and regenerate its power to create a new state of being” (Fu-Kiau 27). In a symbolic sense, Sophie undergoes this process of death as she transitions from being spiritually fragmented and physically broken, to fully self-affirming and wholly self-accepting. However, to reach this fully realized state of being, she must master three fundamental steps, or ‘rituals’ that will allow her to heal from intergenerational trauma.

The first step is truth: as women of African descent, our past experiences become burdened by many intersecting systemic oppressions – white supremacy, patriarchy, sexism, classism, colorism, genderism, the Transatlantic Slave Trade, . . .the list could really go on. While these systems of oppression have left many scars upon our collective psyche and bodies, African diasporic women must accept that these painful events play a significant role in shaping who they are, just as beautiful moments do, too. However, the moral code women of African descent must abide by is honesty. They cannot simply hide their pain under a façade of dissimilitude, for in so doing we literally make ourselves sick. Danticat demonstrates this observation with Sophie. Prior undergoing her healing process, Sophie struggles to cope with her intergenerational trauma because she has not yet faced reality. She has not truthfully and honestly reconciled past traumas by accepting that her family has deeply hurt her. Instead, she suppresses her pain, internalizing the hurt. But, as bell hooks reveals, healing cannot take place under dissimulation. As bell hooks states in *Daughters of the Yam*, “Dissimulation makes us dysfunctional. Since it encourages us to deny what we genuinely feel and experience, we lose

our capacity to know who we really are and what we need and desire” (15). As previously discussed earlier, Sophie’s development of multiple neurosis solidifies this point.

This stage of transformation also symbolizes reflection, which is another essential tenet of healing by truth-telling. The capacity to address known and unknown *dams of time* requires an innate understanding of “the interrelation between past, present, and future” (Fu-Kiau 31). The Bakongo express this concept in the analogy of rolling and unrolling a scroll. The dual action of rolling and unrolling a scroll metaphorically symbolizes the unfolding of past knowledge and the revelation of new, experiential knowledge that emerges through daily processes of life. To live and be in time necessitates the ability to move freely back and forth on the scroll of time (31-33). In terms of healing, Fu-Kiau demonstrates that women of African descent must learn to reflect upon all aspects of their lives in order to reconcile their past, present, and future. They must look backwards to their pasts and critically consider how the experiential knowledge they’ve acquired influences their present-day. They must consider whether or not this knowledge promotes life or causes destruction; because not all experiences are ‘good,’ women of African descent must be careful in the way they interpret and enforce experiential knowledge in the future. Therefore, women of African descent must practice foresight as they weigh how their past and present events will impact the future. The Akan people of Ghana refer to this reflexive concept of time through the Adinkra symbol, Sankofa, which implies that people must look to their pasts in order to understand their futures. This stage of consciousness cannot come into fruition without the act of reflection, which the Bakongo symbolize through speech acts.

For the Bakongo, this stage represents the time when spoken words die, and the time of reflection begins. In the first stage of reflection, the speaker takes time to look at her/his words and actions to understand her/his impact on his/her community, the universe, and nature. Keep in

mind that speech and words are integral components of life. Through the act of speaking, humans have the power to make intangible thoughts material realities. Through silence, humans create the space to introspect, to develop a sense of awareness through an honest, candid reckoning about the experiences they have had, and the way these past events have informed their decisions. Reflection through truth-telling, therefore, is an essential tenet of healing because it enables women of African descent to embrace all of the events, thoughts, and words, that have socialized them, alongside their responses to these past events. It is no coincidence then, that Sophie begins to heal as soon as she builds the courage to face reality and reflect truthfully on the ways her family has hurt her and her responses to that hurt. Danticat symbolizes this stage of healing through speech acts as well. After Sophie lashes out her emotions in the cane fields, she has a candid moment of reflection that demonstrates she has finally managed to reconcile the hurt of her past with the pain of her present. She solemnly states:

There is always a place where nightmares are passed on through generations like heirlooms. Where women like cardinal birds return to look at their own faces in stagnant bodies of water. I come from a place where breath, eyes, and memory are one, a place from which you carry your past like the hair on your head. Where women return to their children as butterflies or as tears in the eyes of the statues that their daughters pray to . . . Yes, my mother was like me. (Danticat 238)

The similitude Sophie draws between herself and her mother signify empathy, which is one of the most liberating, self-affirming signs of the healing. The compassion and understanding Sophie extends to her mother, despite the way her mother has mistreated her over the years, indicates that she no longer internalizes the anger she once felt towards her mother; instead, she now views her mother as broken and fragmented, too, but nonetheless trying her best to be a

good mother. From the standpoint of careful reflection, acceptance, and truth telling, Sophie demonstrates that she has built the courage to face the shadows of the past and truthfully admit how they currently impact her. Because she develops this empowerment, she may now assert agency over the way she continues to move into her future as an individual, wife, and mother.

Another critical component in healing is open communication, which Danticat parallels with Sophie's first return to Haiti. This stage of the Kongo cosmogram reiterates the importance of healing through community via the emphasis Bakongo, and most African people place on orality. While reflection can refer to candid introspection, as discussed in the above paragraphs, reflection also refers to the act of listening and hearing. Listeners and hearers reflect on the words a speaker has shared in order to inform their behavior and interactions with their community. The fact that speech is associated with life-affirming qualities and involves the entire community connotes that healing can only happen through the collective involvement of the community. For women of African descent, our mental wellness directly correlates with the strength of our communal ties – and as Danticat highlights, the fortitude of our communal ties begins with open communication. As mentioned earlier, Sophie's spiritual and mental decline begins at the age of twelve, as soon as she moves to New York per her mother's request. However, once she returns to Haiti as an adult, she immediately begins to heal. As an adult, Tante Atie acknowledges that Sophie no longer needs to hear coming of age stories – she needs unfiltered, woman-to-woman insight that can help her cope with the legacy of testing that traumatizes the Caco women. And, more importantly, she needs to speak her truth to those who have harmed her. In the passage where Sophie talks about doubling, she confesses to Granmè Ifé how traumatizing testing has been for her, not just as a child, but also as an adult. She states, "I hated the tests . . . [i]t is the most horrible thing that ever happened to me. When my husband is

with me now, it gives me such nightmares that I have to bite my tongue to do it again” (156).

Granmè Ifé, rooted in her old ways, fails to acknowledge Sophie’s hurt at first. She dismissively says, “With patience, it will go away” (156). Sophie adamantly, but respectfully, corrects her: “No, Granmè Ifé, it does not” (156). Before Granmè Ifé goes to bed, she gives Sophie her statue of Erzulie, and apologizes sincerely: “My heart, it weeps like a river, for the pain we have caused you” (156).

Danticat exhibits that the reciprocal nature of open communication is precisely what makes it such a powerful spiritual tool for women of African descent because it has the power to heal pain through shared experiences and solidarity. Sophie learns that Granmè Ifé, in an attempt to be a good mother, especially without a man in the house, passed along testing in an effort to protect her daughters and herself from shame. bell hooks notes, however, that oftentimes, women of African descent parent their children harshly in an effort to be perceived by the outside world as ‘good’ parents, and that this definition of ‘good parenting’ is really rooted in the white supremacist notion of control (24). While these negative styles of parenting are intended to prepare Black girls for the harshness of white supremacy and patriarchy and sexism, this style of parenting often yields a lifetime of hurt and dysfunctional behavior (24). As Sophie has undergone the first stage of healing, which is acknowledging the sources of her trauma, she likewise demonstrates healing through her community. By establishing an open line of communication with Granmè Ifé, Sophie finds solidarity with the rest of the Caco women through their shared experience with testing. And although this experience has scarred each of them, Sophie takes the first steps in her family to confront the issue directly in a constructive, life-affirming way. Through open communication, Granmè Ifé becomes the ancestral spiritual anchor Sophie has been needing to come to terms with her past. While Sophie has reconciled her

relationship with Granmè Ifé, at this current moment in the novel, she still has not reconnected with her mother since her mother exiled her from her home after failing the test. As healing through community requires reconciliation among all members within her community, Sophie still has to do the heavy lifting of repairing her relationship with her mother and her husband, Joseph.

The final step towards healing Sophie must take is accountability and responsibility. Women of African descent must always consider their role in the way their current situations are and our role in the process of healing. It is important to clarify here that accountability and responsibility are not synonymous with victim blaming. While victim blaming seeks to shame or guilt women of African descent into believing they are solely responsible for white supremacy, sexism, patriarchy, and other discourses of domination, accountability and responsibility ask women of African descent to participate in constructive critical affirmation (hooks 27) to build self-confidence and a sense of empowerment. Battling intersecting oppressions is a life-long war for women of African descent – and the further removed they become from life-affirming communal practices that nourish their souls, more deadly tis battle becomes. According to Bernie Siegel, author of, *Peace, Love, and Healing*, “people may learn helplessness if they have had repeated experiences of being unable to change external circumstances through their own efforts” (quoted in bell hooks 128). As a result, women of African descent fall into a victim mentality. Martine, Sophie’s mother manifests these symptoms. She continues to run from her fears rather than take the initiative to confront them, and in the end, the dark shadows of her past subsume her will to live. However, through critical examination, women of African descent can identify the invisible structures of domination that have placed years of hurt within their hearts; by calling them out, women of African descent restore their sense of agency.

Disease and Sickness: Maat, Sankofa, Maafa . . .

In the “Afterword to the 20th Anniversary Edition,” titled “As Brave as Stars at Dawn,” Edwidge Danticat shares her reflections on *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, stating that “[she] was . . . regularly scolded by Haitians and Haitian Americans, who believed [she] was making unfair generalizations about Haitian culture” (251). Although her intention was not to generalize, Danticat recognizes why the text angered so many people: in 1994, when so few Haitian authors were writing in English, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* stood as a tokenized representation of Haiti and Haitian culture, especially at a time when negative stigmas about Haiti were already in circulation (251).

The traumatic image of Haiti Danticat portrays – as a country constantly in a state of political, social, and civil unrest, yet imbued with life through African spiritual memory – reconnects members of African descent to our legacy as divine beings while acknowledging our current lived experience as colonized subjects constantly fighting for survival amid the diseased landscape of White Supremacy. In the interview, “Maat, Sankofa, Maat: Countering the Yurugu Virus,” Marimba Ani draws a clear parallel between sickness, White Supremacy, and colonialism; and African spirituality and healing:

. . .if we can use the metaphor of health, healing and disease, then Maat [African spiritual cosmology] is health. That's important because Africans tend to function in a diseased environment and don't know what health looks like -- we look at the disease as if it were natural and healthy. What's natural to us is something that we've become unfamiliar with on a superficial level. So this paradigm begins with Maat which is Truth, Wholeness, the Well, and the Source which gives life. (Abstract 1)

Evidently, Ani's metaphor of health, healing, and disease inspire different connotations in the African worldview and the European worldview. As Ani alludes, Wholeness, Oneness, and Unity are foundational concepts in the African worldview because it is through these concepts that African people define their existence on Earth. Contrary to the European worldview, African people do not separate their experiences from natural processes that occur on Earth (the physical realm), or the unseen forces that govern the spiritual and cosmic world. It is understood that human life is no greater or lesser than any other, and in acknowledging this connection, African people make meaning of their lives through totality versus the dichotomized segmentation inherent in the European worldview. Therefore, "to be human means to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in beliefs ceremonies, rituals, and festivities of that community" (Mbiti 2).

Community in the African sense comprises all things in the universe – spiritual/physical, seen/unseen, animate/inanimate, for all things are endowed with sacred life. The ancestral, spiritual, natural, and cosmic realms are all a part of the African community. Because African people consider the universe to be one unified whole made complete through these diverse, but interdependent and interconnected networks, what happens in one part of the universe will necessarily impact all of the others: that is, what happens to the individual impacts the entire system, and vice versa. From an African perspective, then, to be *healed* means to be at peace with all realms and beings in the universe, for one broken relationship necessitates ruptured connections elsewhere in the Whole. *Healed* and *healing*, thus connote the African subject's striving to maintain wholeness and take steps of reconciliation to heal ruptures in the network. Ani's metaphor, then, reaffirms that sickness in the African worldview stems from broken relationships in one's community, which the individual must reconcile through community

engagement before healing can begin or be complete. In his article, “Persistence of Features,” Nahashon W. Ndung’u affirms this fact, stating that,

the term ‘healing’ implies the putting in order of those systems, structures and feelings which have been disrupted causing imbalances and suffering in the life of individuals and society at large. Thus, healing in the African context involves the restoration of broken relationships, between the individual with God, ancestors, community or others. (88)

In her metaphor, Marimba Ani also makes a very clear distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ ways of living, confirming that as colonized subjects, people of African descent are living in an environment that continually denies spirit, [so] our spiritual expression becomes distorted” (3). What naturally happens is the gradual erosion of our connection to ‘the Well,” i.e., African spiritual memory and the healing lore within. She calls this unnatural state of existence, *Maafa*, which translates as “the process of disconnection from the source” (3). As a result of colonization and enslavement, many African people have developed spiritual sicknesses, such as inferiority complexes: “. . .a syndrome of dependency where one becomes convinced of one's own inferiority and therefore feels that one needs a superior or master” (Ani 3).

Ani asserts that colonized African people must look to Maat, or our divine spiritual past in order to heal from the inferiority complexes white supremacy and colonialism have imprinted on our collective psyche. African spiritual memory is rooted in reflection, transformation, rebirth, spirit, truth, order, and righteousness. As such, the African worldview inherently promotes a healthy, natural state of interacting with the universe. In turning to their spiritual past for culturally specific counsel and guidance, African people can confront current systemic oppressions of today. As evidenced, prior colonization (Arabic and European), African people

were able to self-heal through rituals that celebrated spiritual memory as a moral ethical and social standard to live by.

Ani's metaphorical comparison between health, healing, and disease is one Danticat relies on in her novel to dispel colonialist myths about Haiti that began long ago, yet still operate today. News media outlets tend to describe Haiti as "a country plagued by political instability, violence, disarray, and immortality, among other problems," but these same media outlets do nothing to acknowledge the violence inherent in white supremacist and colonial structures that birthed the political turmoil in the first place (Jean-Baptiste). Where European powers narrate the history of colonialism via one incomplete and dominant tale, Danticat negates it by telling the Truth, or in the African worldview, telling a narrative that is reciprocal. Reciprocity, for African people, means to speak and act for one another in mutually beneficial ways. She shares the weight of the colonial legacy in Haiti by telling a balanced account of the events that have made Haiti what it is, a re-telling that stresses the West's responsibility in the degradation of Haiti and certain African nations' complicity in this process; however, at the heart of these two narratives is the story of Haitian resistance that so many tend to forget. Through the power of African spirit, enslaved Haitians overturned the entire system of colonialism, becoming the first independent country to break free of colonial rule and a beacon of light for enslaved people everywhere. Still, like most colonized countries, Haiti still grapples with this colonial legacy. The residue of all these influences – colonialism, complicity, and Haitian resistance – have left an indelible mark on the Haitian terrain, which manifest in the syncretic cultural practices that have defined Haiti for years.

In tandem with Ani's metaphor, Danticat uses syncretic storytelling to mirror the blended Haitian landscape, amplifying the West's damaging role in Haiti and the spirit of resistance that

has aided Haitians in surviving. While colonialism and slavery symbolize the “Yurugu virus” that sickens Haiti and its diaspora, African spiritual memory, or Haitian Vodou, symbolizes the healing “Well” that fortifies it. In the scene below, Danticat incorporates colonial symbols and voices from the Haitian diaspora to tell an intertextual depiction of Haiti under the French colonial thumb.

Whenever she was sad, Tante Atie would talk about the sugar cane fields, where she and my mother practically lived when they were children. They saw people die there from sunstroke every day. Tante Atie said that, one day while they were all working together, her father—my grandfather—stopped to wipe his forehead, leaned forward, and died. My grandmother took the body in her arms and tried to scream the life back into it. They all kept screaming and hollering, as my grandmother’s tears bathed the corpse’s face. Nothing would bring my grandfather back. (4)

Undoubtedly, through syncretic storytelling, Danticat illustrates that the Haitian landscape is indeed sick; more importantly, she indicates that Haiti’s diseased landscape is a reflection of European’s ‘diseased’ worldview. Dichotomized thinking and the desacralization of the universe are pathological issues that drive the European worldview; to Europeans, the universe is not considered a unified whole, but a fragmented thing meant to be controlled, dominated, and exploited. The colonial rhetoric and literary traits from slave narratives of the African Diaspora reflect the consequences of this worldview as they allude to the distorted landscape under French colonial rule, as well as the harsh living conditions, barbaric abuse, and low mortality rates enslaved Africans suffered in Saint Domingue under French colonialism (1650-1803). Prior French arrival, Spanish colonizers had already decimated the Taino Native American population

during their colonial era in Hispaniola that began in 1492. When the French arrived, they ravaged the natural ecosystem of Saint Domingue (colonial Haiti) even more in their rush to produce economic profits from sugar, tobacco, coffee, and indigo. French powers in the mainland recognized that repopulation and labor would increase profitability, so they invested many resources in this endeavor. At first, the colony consisted of disbanded French who were looking to start a new life and working-class whites, but in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, Saint Domingue underwent an explosive growth in production that led to an increased need for labor. Cane harvests and cane estates increased exponentially, particularly because of British demands for sugar. However, with this boom in industry, the French had divided the landscape according to their massive production needs, irrespective the damages they caused to the land.

Docent Per Lindskog states,

“There is plenty of evidence too, during the first part of the 18th century, of the ravages of the vegetation of Saint Domingue, not only of the trees, but also of grass cover through more extensive grazing than the land could support. The most important reason for this was not the activities of the poorest people (slaves . . .and indigenous but as a result of the deeds of colonists” (76).

Deforestation and desertification became major problems in Saint Domingue as French colonizers destroyed entire forests in the name of industrialization. The French colonizers planted sugar in the southern plains, coffee plantations in the mountains, and indigo plantations in the northern plains. Today, 8,500 plantations scatter Haiti, which attests to the massive loss of tree life and fauna French colonialism engendered (qtd. by Hebblewaithe 9).

Just as the ravaged landscape of Saint Domingue (colonial Haiti) reflected the scars of colonialism, so did the bodies of the slaves. Tante Atie’s reference to sugar cane, back-breaking

labor, death, and sunstroke acknowledge that Saint Domingue amassed its wealth off the broken backs of enslaved Africans. Hebblewaithe asserts, “the biggest sugar plantations were three hundred acres in size, confining enslaved workforces that ranged between fifty and six hundred men, women, and children (qtd. from Geggus 12). Each year, between 1700-1725, new enslaved Africans were deported from Africa to Saint Domingue. By 1790, 48,000 slaves were deported, which is the central reason behind the Haitian Revolution of 1791. There is no argument against the abuse enslaved Africans faced in Saint Domingue. Although “all slaves toiled under the hot sun like beasts of burden,” women suffered especially (Boivert 62). According to David Geggus, author of, “Slave Society in the Sugar Plantation Zones,” “. . . women made up two-thirds of field slaves on the sugar estates in this period, it may be that a critical threshold was crossed in the province beyond which the punishing regime of sugar cultivation began to impinge on slave women's fertility, or the life expectancy of their infants” (Geggus 37). During the Middle Passage to Saint Domingue, many women became sterile and remained sterile for two years or more under the brutal slave conditions. Many women lost their babies while being flayed and whipped – slaveowners merely built holes underneath their bodies to catch their miscarried child (Boivert 63). Miscarriages among enslaved women happened so frequently, and because of this, slave labor was in constant demand.

On top of the physical and sexual abuse female slaves faced in Saint Domingue, they were also unable to move into better types of labor. “Men were 8 times more likely than women to receive a position that did not involve the toil of laboring in the lands” (10). Some women worked in factories, but because of chronic fatigue, many of them fell asleep while operating the machinery and died or lost a limb. Enslaved women also performed the bulk of plantation field labor – lifting boulders, removing trees, harvesting cane, hoeing, weeding, tilling, and plowing

the land (10). In fact, women worked all day and all night with less than four hours of sleep every day, humped over toiling cane. Under the duration of extreme field labor and the duress of abuse, enslaved African women developed distorted spines, feet, and hands from laboring in the cane fields and whippings. Even pregnant women toiled in this manner until a few weeks from delivery. The excerpt above, in tandem with Danticat's reference to the "pineapple-sized hump, which did not show through [Granme Ifè's] clothes," serves as a memory archive connecting the trauma of colonialism to the natural landscape and the female body. Likewise, in *Tell My Horse*, Zora Neale Hurston characterizes how the "brute labors of plantation life "distort" the women into pathetic, subhuman forms, de-creating them into the prevailing image of Black women-as-animals," or as "mules of the world" (qtd. by Rachel Stein 32).

Syncretic storytelling in the African worldview is directly associated with healing because it initiates listeners/readers into the shared experiences of the larger community, or Whole, by way of imparting emotions, wisdom, cultural norms, values, social expectations, and a moral code of ethics by which listeners/readers can formulate a healthy identity. Using Sophie as her vessel and Tante Atie as a memory bank, Danticat prioritizes telling the story of colonialism in Haiti from the perspective of the Haitians who have first-hand experience versus the stigmatized narratives of Western powers. In the excerpt above, for example, Tante Atie loses her father and spends her entire childhood watching people dies mercilessly. Her sadness traumatic experience as a colonial subject, but also connect her past memories of pain and sadness to that of the African collective, to Sophie, and finally, to the reader. In so doing, Danticat calls out colonialism for the brutal, inhumane, and violent social construct that it truly is. This thread of shared humanity negates arguments that colonialism benefited colonized

subjects and restores historical evidence to the contrary that Europeans want to exclude from the Western collective conscious.

The intertextuality at play in the excerpt above indicates that Danticat understood her own need for spiritual healing, and by extension, the need for healing within the African diaspora. Through syncretic storytelling, Danticat incorporates painful historical memories from the African collective alongside her own traumatic experiences, and weaves them into the fabric of her fictional text. She pulls from this indigenous African tradition to shape a new discourse of communion, demonstrating the efficacy of the African worldview in the process of healing. In the African worldview, healing is holistic, meaning the physical, spiritual, social, and the natural realms must all be in communication for the healing process to start. On a structural level, Danticat adheres to this unified ideal. Danticat's historical account of colonialism intertwines with Tante Atie's shared experience as a direct descendant of colonialism, and Sophie Caco is Danticat's "vessel," through which readers obtain a personalized account of Danticat's life. In the context of literature, the writer and the reader must also partake in the narrative. From an African-centered perspective, it can be argued that Danticat, as the writer and storyteller, functions like a Griot, interpolating each 'member' of her community to participate in the story she tells above. Tante Atie and Sophie, as fictional characters, yet 'real' in the imagination of the readers psyche take on a cosmic role in Danticat's community. Physically, they are intangible, but they do exist ideologically (like matter, or atoms). Tante Atie's connection to the collective memories of the African diaspora connote a spiritual, ancestral presence. And finally, the social and physical realm comprise Danticat and the reader. I am aware that this interpretation of Danticat's novel may seem unfamiliar to most; however, in the African worldview, all things that possess energy are living, breathing members in the universe: for this reason, ideas, concepts,

dreams – anything the heart can imagine and speak into existence – is considered a life form. So, in this manner, Danticat transforms the physical (or digital!) presence of her novel into an ideological safe space for her readers to come together in solidarity to share their experiences.

And in this manner, the healing process begins. Each member brings a new meaning to the narrative situation by way of imagination and their own memorialized stories. For Tante Atie, telling her story seems equally as important as Sophie's need to hear it. As a colonial subject, Tante Atie still feels the pain of losing her father in the sugar cane fields as a child. She still remembers people dying in the cane fields, just like him, every day. She still remembers the back-breaking labor, the heat of the sun, and most importantly, her denigrated social status because she is woman, Black, Haitian, and illiterate. In the hostile colonial terrain, each of these qualities are strikes against her. Quite simply, Tante Atie tells this story to heal. As Charles Manda, author of, "Healing and Reconciliation," quotes, ". . .remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims . . .when the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery" (4). Telling her story, speaking her truth, Tante Atie not only imparts historical wisdom unto Sophie, but also instills the moral ethic that all things are connected.

For Sophie, the story is healing both for the historical knowledge it imparts and for the context in which it is told. Earlier in the scene, when Tante Atie asks Sophie about her day at school, Sophie responds,

"School was all right . . . I like everything but those reading classes they let parents come to in the afternoon. Everybody's parents come except you. I never have anyone to read with, so Monsieur Augustin always pairs me off with an old lady who wants to learn her letters, but does not have children at the school." (3-4)

Sophie's egocentric response not only connotes resentment towards Tante Atie for not attending the classes, but also frustration at the old lady for her age and social status. Spoken out of frustration, Sophie's words are harmful for Tante Atie because the old woman and she are ideologically the same: Tante Atie does not have children, she cannot read, and she is older than the children in Sophie's class who are leading the lessons. Her words are also harmful to her community, for they indicate a lack of respect for the elderly, and other members in the Haitian community who have not been formally educated.

Tante Atie, recognizing that Sophie lacks empathy for her community as a residual effect of colonialism, purposely tells her a new story in a way that she can understand. In the African tradition, Tante Atie begins her story by establishing empathy and community as shared points of reference between all the actors in the discursive moment. She opens her story with these words: "At one time, I would have given anything to be in school. But not at my age. My time is gone. Cooking and cleaning, looking after others, that's my school now" (Danticat 4). Tante Atie's opening lines are deeply personal, yet directly intended for Sophie to hear. The person Tante Atie looks after is Sophie; the person she cooks for, feeds, and cleans up after is Sophie. The old lady with no children is Tante Atie herself. Through shared empathy for one another, Tante Atie has prepared Sophie's heart to hear a new story about empathy and respect for community. For this reason, the excerpt above juxtaposes the brutality of colonialism with the healing process of African storytelling; that is, the initial anger Sophie expresses towards her aunt, and the misguided contempt she directs towards the old woman transform into empathy, a healthier emotion that can help Sophie understand why Tante Atie feels embarrassed about learning to read from children. More importantly, as discussed later on, empathy is a critical tool Danticat emphasizes as Sophie begins her own healing processes. As Kwame Gyekye states, in *African*

Cultural Values, “. . . bringing up children to feel that they have responsibilities towards others is part of the whole process of socialization” (65).

For the African diasporic readers, like me, Danticat’s narrative functions like a meeting place where our shared memories as colonial subjects can intermingle freely with hers, her ancestors, and the Black African diaspora. Particularly for women of African descent, curating safe spaces for them to share their stories is a critical aspect of healing in the African worldview. As readers, we bring our own memories to this shared space, invoking a new kind of internal dialogue that spans beyond the physical words on the page. We remember our ancestors’ experiences as colonized subjects, but as people first, which alludes to the humanity Danticat restores to Haiti’s traumatized landscape in the scene above. Not only are African oral traditions useful for transmitting culture, information, and experiential knowledge, but they are also played a vital role in transmitting spiritual practices and moral ethics. Such spiritual practices continue to the present time, conveying nourishment and healing for the soul.

Conclusion

From the onset of her novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat emphasizes that the Caco women are undergoing their own unique rite of passage that necessitates healing and recovery. As a result of white supremacy, colonialism, sexism, patriarchy, and genderism, Sophie struggles to recapture the spiritual wholeness indicative of wellness in the African worldview. She perpetually struggles to tap into the cultural “Well” of spiritual memory that she desperately needs to begin the process of healing. Danticat metaphorically mirrors the Kongo cosmogram, demonstrating that white supremacy, intergenerational trauma, and healing all exist within the cyclical nature of time, and that women of African descent must fortify themselves through spiritual memory to resist victimization.

The Kongo cosmogram stands as a reminder that the ideal state of existence is Wholeness, or as Ani solidifies, Health; that is peace, or healthy relationships between all. The pursuit of peace, harmony, and oneness necessitate constant effort, action, and striving, for if humans do not put in the effort to live accordingly, they bring about destructive forces that harm life-giving processes and life forms – including themselves. Health and Wholeness are synonymous then: where health reflects the ideal state of human existence, healing is the process – the work, the energy – that humans must invest to maintain, preserve, and repair connections between all realms of the universe as their actions directly correlate with, and are impacted by, the preservation of life everywhere.

African societies have marked the transition of life cycles from birth to death for many years, for they have long understood that all living beings operate according to the cyclical movement of time captured in the Kongo cosmogram. This cyclical movement ensures the preservation of life in the universe and on Earth. Because all beings (inanimate/animate, spiritual/physical, seen/unseen) in the universe are connected and interdependent, the preservation of life requires a delicate balance between all living things, all realms, and all the networks that unify them in one, Whole shared existence. What occurs to one aspect of life, impacts the rest, whether it engenders discord or peace.

This cyclical movement ensures the preservation of life in the universe and on Earth; therefore, to honor and remember their accountability in this sacred process, most African societies have developed rites of passage designed to pass on this age-old wisdom. According to Monica Thulisile Bhuda and Motheo Koitsiwe, “Birth, puberty, marriage, having children, [eldership, ancestorship], and death are significant transitional times in a person's life that [African people mark] by ceremonies (17282). The temporal progression of the Sun according to

the Kongo cosmogram directly corresponds with the five milestones humans experience as biological life forms on Earth, which I have included below:

I/V. *Musoni* Time and *makièlo* (Precreation / Pregnancy / Rebirth)

II. *Kala* Time and *kinsâmina* (Birth / Youth)

III. *Tukula* Time and *nsinsa* (Adulthood / marriage, having children)

IV. *Luvemba* Time and *malo-ma-tulu* (Death / Eldership / Ancestorship]

As shown above, each principle time not only aligns with the temporal movement of the sun, but also the human life cycle. As a result, African rites of passage provide historical and socio-cultural value for initiates and the community. Each stage of life has its own unique ceremony that coincides with the community's societal expectations and provide initiates a sense of identity.

Although each African community has its own variation of rites depending on their culture and geographical location, the foundational purpose of these rituals remains the same: to initiate youths into adulthood, signifying their "death" as children and their resurrection as new, contributing members in their community. In this manner, the initiate dies to live again, adopting a new way of being that honors community practices, shared knowledge, retained history, and experiential wisdom. The spiritual memory embedded within African rituals is essentially what makes them divine, and for a long time, misinterpreted.

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CHAPTER FIVE: KEY FINDINGS FROM LITERATURE WRITTEN BY AFRICAN DIASPORIC WOMEN

As Audre Lorde poignantly states, “[w]omen responding to racism means women responding to anger; Anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and co-optation” (Audre Lorde). I am that woman. I have been that woman. The weight of underrepresentation within Western academia is constant – it is a burden most women of African descent understand all too well. Coming from an HBCU, I cannot ignore how underrepresentation in predominately white institutions has attempted to elongate me from my own cultural heritage, but through writing, I have learned how to navigate this issue in my own sort of way. Almost every essay I have written during my academic career has been about Black people irrespective the course content. Prioritizing people of African descent has been my lifeline, my own way of keeping in touch with my ancestral roots. This dissertation functions as an extension of that lifeline. By exploring literature written by women of African descent, I have not only had the opportunity to re-connect with my own ancestral heritage, but I have also played a small part in sharing the pivotal role spirituality plays in the preservation of Black women and their communities. This dissertation addresses many issues that women of African descent face, and likewise, yields many noteworthy findings that do not just pertain to women of African descent. Although I encountered some challenges, these obstacles elucidated further areas for research that I am open to exploring as I progress as a life-long Africana scholar.

Although Chapter one, “I am your betrothed,” took me down an entirely different path than I had envisioned and was the most challenging chapter to write, the nuanced information I learned about precolonial women in Bechuanaland, which is now present-day Botswana, opened my eyes to the struggles precolonial Kgatla women faced at the axis of patriarchy and sexuality. Initially, I had hoped to explore the role of spirituality among precolonial indigenous African women, but as I gleaned the databases for insight, I often found articles that addressed land usage among indigenous African women, and how their traditional ways of tending the land provided sustainable alternatives to environmental degradation brought about via capitalism and mass production. While I found that spirituality played an integral role in indigenous women’s land use, I struggled to connect these practices to the traditional poem I had chosen as a primary source. I shifted my research question to focus on African oral traditions as spiritual practices among precolonial women, and in the process, gleaned valuable information about both indigenous African women and precolonial women. This slight shift yielded many engaging findings about precolonial women in Botswana, particularly how spirituality shapes their lives as women, and how they as women tap into the experiential knowledge encoded within African oral traditions to give voice to their own experiences.

First, research indicates that indigenous and precolonial African people consider the human body a vessel used to give meaning to the spiritual. The material world represents the physical manifestation of procreative, generative forces that ebb and flow from the spiritual realm to the universe and back. For African people, this ebb and flow of divine energy creates life in the physical realm, and as such, is considered sacred. As extensions of the spiritual realm and its procreative forces, many indigenous African people mirror the procreative forces associated with the spiritual realm via social practices, such as rituals dedicated to fertility,

birthing, and marriage. For indigenous and precolonial women, this divine charge imposed many burdens upon them as a result of patriarchal social expectations. This finding is especially valid for Kgatla women, which the singer demonstrates via her satirical lyrics. The emphasis the speaker places on gender, sex, and marriage allude to the agnate social structure of the Kgatla tribe. The highly patrilineal structure of the tribe not only prioritized male lineage, but it did so at the expense of women. As the poem shows, women were valuable to their communities in terms of fertility and labor, but they lacked much agency beyond these strictures. Finally, another key finding is that Kgatla women relied on spiritual memory encoded within oral literature to subvert, condemn, and denigrate male domination. As marriage played an integral role among the Kgatla tribe, women performed many satirical songs to communicate the hardships associated with becoming a wife. In this particular traditional poem, “I am your betrothed,” the female speaker distorts characteristics of the marriage customs, thereby reducing the male figure in the poem to a submissive, emasculated status.

In response to mainstream gatekeepers’ widespread attempts to whitewash Egypt in popular culture and academia, chapter two dispels the notion that people of African descent lacked a historical presence in the foundation of Egyptian civilization. Rooted in white supremacy, these tactics contribute to the fallacious notion that people of African descent are innately inferior to whites, and therefore, incapable of rigorous thought, building complex knowledge, or better yet, establishing civilizations without the assistance of outside powers, such as Greeks, Persians, and Romans. To dispel these myths, I traced the origins of *Maat*, which is the unifying moral ideal upon which classical and Ancient Egyptian civilizations are built. *Maat* is the organized belief that the universe thrives on order, harmony, and balance; therefore, humans must strive to uphold this moral ethical code in thought, speech, and deed. Research

indicates that Maat has origins in pre-dynastic Nubia (pre-3150 BCE) among pastoral and nomadic Black Africans. Their intimate relationship with the land and nature fostered a growing need to articulate their place in an ever-changing world. Although pastoral and nomadic Africans did not refer to Maat by name, most African people adhere to principles of Maat in their creation stories.

The finding above solidifies that Maat as an ethical ideal arose during prehistoric African people, specifically Nubians. To learn more about the connection between Maat and Nubians, I landed upon another key finding: Egypt, despite its popularity, is not Africa's oldest civilization, nor is it the first moment in history where Maat appears as a unifying framework among African people. Nubians, one of the oldest ethnic groups in the world, are the first to establish civilization based upon Maat as an organizing ethical principle. The Egyptians later referred to this civilization as Ta-Seti, which means "Land of the Bow." Nubia encompasses territory from present-day Northern Sudan to Southern Egypt, which includes the Horn of Africa, Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Libya. Because Nubian empires developed long before Egyptian civilization began, and segued into Egyptian rise, classical and ancient texts refer to this prosperous area by many names: among the Egyptians, Nubia was also known as the Kingdom of Kush, and among the Greeks, Nubia was referred to as Ethiopia. In the Bible, Nubia is referred to as Kemet, which denotes Nubia's longstanding heritage as the first Kemetic civilization. According to the archaeological findings of Keith C. Seele in 1962, Ta-Seti possesses the oldest lineage of monarchy in human history.

The numerous artifacts, burial practices, pyramids, and hieroglyphic markings mirror those which Egyptians later adopted in architecture and rituals dedicated to the Afterlife. Likewise, in tracing the connection between Nubia and later Egyptian civilizations, I found that

distinguished scholar, Cheikh Anta Diop, had established many similarities between the dark-skinned Nubians of Ta-Seti and the Egyptian rulers who practiced *Maat*. Divine Kingship, of course, was the most indelible shared characteristic, but the emphasis Egyptians placed on balance, harmony, and order establishes an integral link between African cosmology as seen among pastoral and nomadic Africans, Nubians, and Egyptians. These scientific findings are critical to the race-debate that popular culture tends to amplify by ‘whitening’ Egypt. They also negate the white supremacist attitudes operating invisibly within academia. Often, white faculty – whether intentional or not – assume that people of African descent are naturally inferior, and thus, produce inferior, “less rigorous” scholarship. The cosmological understanding of the universe African people have used not only to survive, but thrive, contradicts this Eurocentric notion, and stands as the most prosperous ethical framework in the creation of civilizations. For this reason, I find the myth of African inferiority laughable: stolen African artifacts fill British, German, and French museums – amassing these great white nations incredible wealth – and the architectural complexity of the Egyptian pyramids still mystifies the entire Western imagination.

After I had explored the way African epistemology functioned as a prehistoric, classical, and ancient spiritual practice, I sought to explore how ancient African women participated in this ancient wisdom. Much of the research discussed Divine Kingship, yet I had not come across any references to women. In the book, *Daughters of Africa*, I noticed that Margaret Busby had included two understudied works of literature written, or spoken, by Queen Hatshepsut and Queen Makeda. I was fascinated. From the moment I read the translations, I noticed a metaphorical and symbolic connection between both women’s words, African Creation Myths, and the principles of Maat. By using Maatian ethics and African cosmology as theoretical frameworks to analyze both works, I found each piece of writing laden with symbolic and

spiritual meanings that coincide with African concepts of *coming into being* and *the pursuit of wisdom* as a divine activity. While I interpreted Queen Makeda's words as her own, personalized Creation Myth that aligns with those African people have told for eons and in different variations, I interpreted Queen Hatshepsut's engraved speech as her testament to the gods that she had fulfilled her duties as a Divine King in accordance with Maat. I incorporated *Ptahhotep's Teachings* to understand how Egyptians practiced Maatian ethics as an actual social order in their daily lives. I found that speech, listening/hearing, and architecture were significant Maatian ethics to follow, especially for Divine rulers, who sought to preserve their legacy as righteous rulers to incur favor with the gods and to remain alive through memory in the minds of the populace. Analyzing Queen Makeda and Queen Hatshepsut's literary contributions from African-centered perspectives rather than Western theoretical frameworks unveiled nuanced findings about women of African descent that may have otherwise gone unnoticed. Thus, this chapter brings to fore the value of African epistemology as a framework through which literature written by people of African descent may be interpreted.

While chapters one and two engage the way precolonial women writers – or orators – of African descent tapped into ancestral spiritual wisdom, chapter three engages the way postcolonial women writers of African descent use spiritual memory within their literary works. The overarching questions I had hoped to answer were, “To what extent do contemporary women writers of African descent tap into precolonial and ancient forms of African spirituality and how? For what reasons?” I based my analysis on Toni Morrison's novel, *A Mercy*, because Morrison creatively interweaves several colonial narratives from culturally and ethnically diverse women who have all been scarred by white supremacy, patriarchy, and colonialism in some way. Through her third person omniscient narration, Morrison uses spiritual memory as a means to

narrate each woman's experience as sexualized, racialized, and gendered subjects who are all fighting to survive the harsh terrain of the 'new world.'

As spiritual memory is integral to African cosmology, I decided to explore Morrison's novel through the lens of ecowomanism. As ecowomanism is firmly rooted in African cosmology and womanism, I felt as though this framework might yield important findings in regard to my research question – and it certainly did. The first finding yields a new understanding of Morrison's novel as a whole. While her novel is fictional, through the lens of ecowomanism, her novel can be interpreted as real-life literary activism: that is, she pulls from African spiritual memory encoded in Black women's collective psyche to formulate a narrative of resistance to and criticism of white supremacy, alongside subsequent discourses of domination this destructive worldview has engendered. Through the ecowomanist literary tradition of activism, Morrison unveils how damaging white supremacy is and *why* it is such a destructive worldview. As an extension of Eurocentric epistemology, white supremacy operates from the necessity to control and dominate phenomenon. White supremacy follows a rigid structure wherein difference, separation, and conflict are governing principles; in addition, this dysfunctional moral code rejects the cosmological worldview that most non-European cultures understand as the key to sustaining life on Earth.

Through her portrayal of Florens and a *minha mãe*, Morrison simultaneously illustrates the destructive nature of white supremacy while exposing the genocidal violence it has imposed upon women of African descent. The most egregious violence it imposes on women of African descent is spiritual fragmentation and alienation. For women of African descent, spirituality is defined as experiential wisdom that aids in the survival of future generations. It is knowledge that women pass down to adolescent girls to successfully segue them into adulthood. For

enslaved African women with children, however, this experiential wisdom either becomes severed or distorted as slavery degrades women's social status. For example, the *minha mãe*, is from West Africa, but as an enslaved woman, Portuguese captors and new world plantation owners view her simply as 'Black.' Her heritage, her language, her native ties to her homelands – all of these identifying criteria she has known her entire life have now been reduced to a color. Likewise, her status as a free woman has been degraded to mere property; this degraded status automatically makes her vulnerable to a lifetime of sexual abuse, rape, breeding, and back-breaking labor.

The degraded social status African women suffered as slaves, brings another key point to the forefront: as a result of white supremacy and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, enslaved African women were forced to abandon their cultural concepts of motherhood and family. White male plantation owners often raped African women, not only leaving them psychologically and physically scarred, but also pregnant. In some case, white plantation owners relegated their children to the fields with the rest of the slave children. In other cases, they would sell their illegitimate children to maintain their so-called racial purity. More often, African women were used as breeders, especially towards the end of the Transatlantic Slave Trade when slavery was becoming prohibited. Bucks, or male slaves, were forced to rape African women to produce more offspring that slaveowners would then exploit as property. The severed mother daughter bond the *Minha mãe* and *Florens* share is a direct result of enslaved African women's degraded and vulnerable status. As a result of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the mother's ability to actually be a mother for *Florens* deteriorates under the weight of white supremacy. Likewise, *Florens* childhood is stripped away, not only because she is oversexualized by white men at an early age, but because she lacks an understanding of male domination. More importantly,

Morrison indicates that these ruptured familial and communal bonds impacted many generations of African people. Where white people and even many migrants can easily identify their cultural and ethnic roots – despite being settlers or even immigrants – African American people cannot so easily do this. Our ethnic and cultural ties have been lost through years and years of violent genocide and assimilatory initiatives that keep people of African descent thinking they are ‘just Black.’

Where there is a rift in one part of the cosmological circle of life, so too will there be ruptures elsewhere. This is another pivotal finding that Morrison highlights through Jacob Vaark. While Jacob Vaark is a white male character, his perception of the natural landscape and interaction with it illustrates that Native American and African conceptions of the universe have never been inferior – the dysfunctional ideological values that govern white supremacy manifest as very real abuses against nature, and even humanity itself. The fractured natural landscapes, overridden by European land laws, wars, and Black codes juxtapose the harmonious Native American landscape that once thrived long before. Bacon’s Rebellion, for example, represents the epitome of solidarity in American history because it unified people from different races and classes under one goal. However, this iconic war, as Morrison highlights, is really a dysfunctional representation of solidarity. While ecowomanist view solidarity as humanity working together across boundaries and through differences to establish better communities for everyone, Europeans have often viewed solidarity through the lens of white interests, which excludes non-white communities’ needs. Therefore, because this war began with white interests at the forefront, it fails to be revolutionary in the sense of Earth justice. Morrison’s imagery of fractured, overworked land – made so because of European, Portuguese, Dutch and Spanish needs to dominate phenomena – brings attention to another key point: race, class, and gender

determine the way people perceive nature and their environment. Where white middle-class interests prioritize preserving nature from the standpoint of leisure, Black communities advocate for Earth justice out of the need to survive in inhospitable environments.

Through the characterization of Sorrow, Morrison captures the importance of spiritual memory for women of African descent. Foremost, African spiritual memory, though it is often fragmented, incomplete, and sometimes not wholly accurate, is integral to African diasporic women's survival. Embedded within spiritual memory is experiential knowledge that helps women of African descent resist intersecting oppressions and heal from the wounds white supremacy has left deep within our psyches and on our physical bodies. Healing, for women of African descent, often entails creativity; we share ancestral roots with the African diaspora, but as kidnappees of the Atlantic Slave Trade, we are also daughters of a new world. Even with the anchoring of African spiritual memory, establishing an identity that honors our ancestral roots while considering the trauma of sexism, classism, racism, capitalism, patriarchy, and genderism becomes an incredibly difficult feat to accomplish. But, oftentimes, women of African descent face the heaviest burdens to bear, lack the proper support to do it, but have to do it. Recalling Donna Aza Weir-Soley, surviving and healing requires a creolized version of spiritual memory, or the syncretic merging of signs and symbols from both cultures in order to establish a balanced identity. However, women of African descent must ensure that the identity they create prioritizes the cosmological, communal wellness that our ancestors have passed down to us.

In her iconic way, Morrison characterizes Sorrow as a creolized daughter of two worlds who must tap into her own form of ecowisdom to create a sustainable life on Earth. Sorrow embodies mannerisms that align her identity with the Supreme Creator God, Oduduwa of the Yoruba Orisha Tradition, but her fall from the spiritual realm onto Earth forces her to formulate

a syncretic identity that includes her divine status as a goddess and adopted sign systems she learns from the new world. Through her new, creolized identity, Sorrow maintains her ties to the spiritual realm through her new status of motherhood, which spurs her newfound understanding of solidarity with Mistress, Lena, and Florens. Morrison's characterization of Sorrow extends the discourse surrounding environmental justice that so often privileges Eurocentric perspectives. Because African spiritual memory is so fluid, flexible to change, and decentered, it has the capacity to embrace differences and unify people in pursuit of a common goal. Just as environmental injustice stems from discourses of domination that negatively impact the entire human collective, Earth justice requires sustainability efforts from the entire human collective, and as Morrison suggests, the solutions reside in worldviews that are rooted in African cosmological wisdom.

In chapter four, I explore how Haitian author Edwidge Danticat pulls from African cosmology and spiritual memory to craft her novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Told from the perspective of the Haitian protagonist, Sophie Caco, Danticat's narrative unfolds similarly to a coming-of-age-novel. However, I did not want to analyze Danticat's novel from the perspective of a traditional bildungsroman, or according to the linear structure of Freytag's narrative structure. In keeping with Obádélé Kambon's assertion that African Proverbs can be interpreted according to the Dikenga cosmogram, I chose to expand this perspective to Danticat's novel. The narrative structure, in tandem with, the ever-present essence of spiritual memory interwoven within, closely mimics the cyclical passage of time associated with the Kongo cosmogram. Interpreting Danticat's novel via this cyclical passage of time suggests that the Caco women are undergoing their own, personal rite of passage towards healing wherein spiritual memory performs a necessary role in the process. In addition, utilizing the Kongo cosmogram as a

theoretical framework reveals several findings about African diasporic women's experiences as colonized subjects and spiritual beings.

Using the Kongo cosmogram as a framework from which to interpret Danticat's novel, several key findings that Fu-Kiau makes about time in his article "Ntangu-Tandu-Kolo: The Bantu-Kongo Concept of Time," come to light. The first key finding is that all beings – abstract and tangible – operate according to the cyclical nature of time. That is, all beings are born, mature, die, and return to the spiritual realm as energy to be recycled back into the material realm. Sounds a lot like Newton's Law, except the African concept is much older. Another key finding is that time is immeasurable and fluid – it has no beginning and no end. It only becomes measurable through dams of time, which are specific events that impact the natural, cyclical progression of time. Dams of time, or events, are really disruptions that mark the end of one cycle of time and the beginning of another. To reflect this concept of time, the Bakongo use four specific stages of transformation to mark the four transitions of life all beings must undergo to reach completion: *Musoni*, *Kala*, *Tukula*, and *Luvemba*. These four stages of transformation align with the natural rotation of the sun around the Earth, and as such, reflects the human life cycle that African rites of passage reflect.

From this theoretical framework, I interpreted both white supremacy and African cosmology as 'beings' or ideas, that operate according to the cosmogram. Like time, these ideological constructions are abstract, but they have become measurable worldviews that can be determined through specific events, or dams of time. Because these worldviews dictate the way the Caco women make meaning of their lives, I interpreted these worldviews as a metaphorical representation of the *Musoni* stage, or the starting point of identity formation for them. As the *Musoni* stage coincides with precreation and pregnancy, it symbolizes the seedlings of thought,

matter, and energy; in the context of Danticat's novel, this stage represents the seedlings of ancestral lore and white supremacist values that coalesce in the spiritual realm, and eventually, materialize to shape the social lives of each character. From this cosmological interpretation, Danticat reveals an important observation about the way women of African descent learn to make meaning. As Black women, whether they are descendants of colonial enslavement or not, they must constantly navigate these conflicting worldviews as they define their identities. This feat is incredibly difficult to do in a white supremacist world that denigrates and dehumanizes every aspect of their African heritage. Women of African descent, therefore, live their lives in a perpetual state of conflict, wherein they must constantly resist the internalization of 'white ideals' at the expense of their own cultural roots.

Through the second stage of transformation, *Kala* time, Danticat leads readers to another critical understanding. The distress women experience from continuously fighting this ideological battle manifests as physical, mental, and psychological scars that negatively impact their overall wellbeing. In terms of the human life cycle and rites of passage, *Kala* time aligns with birth and speech, specifically naming. Each of these biological processes corresponds with the natural movement of the sun when it rises, bringing the first rays of light into the material world. Symbolically, and in terms of ideas and concepts, this stage represents the first moment that intangible matter (ideas) manifest as physical material (actions and thoughts). In the African worldview, speech and naming are extensions of thought, and therefore, both of these activities represent the first moment that intangible ideas become physical material. Through this understanding of *Kala* time as a metaphorical representation of rites of birth, I interpreted the neuroses Sophie manifests as residual consequences of her internal (unseen) struggle with her identity.

Because these neuroses do not develop until she is forced to leave her entire life in Haiti, including her beloved Tante Atie and Granmè Ifé, to live with her mother in New York, Danticat's criticism seems very clear. The destructive internal dialogues women of African descent internalize to define themselves, akin to the African rituals of birthing and naming, manifests in their behaviors. If the narratives they tell themselves are dysfunctional, then so too will their behavior be. And readers can witness this correlation via Sophie's denigration. Under the weight of white supremacist ideals and subsequent discourses of domination, Sophie's mother has internalized the inferiority complex that is so common among colonized people. She bleaches her skin to lighten it, she rigidly upholds Christian and patriarchal ideals of chastity and virginity, she adopts dysfunctional conceptions of mother-daughter relationships, and she develops a domineering presence in Sophie's life. All of these behaviors stem from her own unresolved traumas and the shame she has internalized as a result. Her chronic low self-esteem manifests in her treatment of Sophie. In an effort to prevent her from the stigmas associated with her sex, race, class, and culture, Martine enforces high expectations upon Sophie that ultimately produce the same lack of confidence within Sophie. As young adult, Sophie develops depression and anxiety, low self-esteem, and extreme isolation. As a young adult, Sophie continues to manifest physical symptoms of anxiety and depression, low self-esteem, and self-mutilates as a final act of escape from testing. In her later adult years, as a mother and wife, she develops erotophobia (fear of sex) and bulimia. The most significant finding that Danticat unveils, is the correlation between colonized subjects' alienation from their ancestral roots, and their increased susceptibility to the destructive forces of white supremacist values. The further removed Sophie becomes from her ancestral roots, the more vulnerable she becomes to American value systems.

Danticat's metaphorical representation of the third stage, *Tukula time*, reveals four key points about women of African descent and spirituality: (1) the culmination of dysfunctional socialization processes women of African descent experience during their youth, adolescence, and as young adults informs the type of adult they will become; and (2) the very clear distinction between Western socialization processes (or lack thereof) and African rites of passage debunks myths of white superiority. (3) *Tukula time* aligns with the human life cycle and rite of passage, adulthood, which is a process unrelated to age in the African worldview. (4) Women of African descent must stay in touch with their ancestral connections in order to fully heal. The continuous war women of African descent must fight to resist the dysfunctional socialization processes of the West often make them more susceptible producing a cycle of intergenerational trauma. memory becomes our metric for defining our existence worldviews influence the way women of African descent make meaning of their lives.

To emphasize the necessary steps women of African descent must undergo to initiate their own journey towards healing, Danticat ushers Sophie through a symbolic sort of death and rebirth. As the final stage of the Kongo cosmogram typifies death, reflection, and rebirth, it mirrors the essential presence of change that sparks Sophie's steps towards healing. For Sophie, she must die first (i.e., relinquish her fragmented identity as a victim of oppression) in order to be reborn (i.e., become fully self-accepting and self-affirming) achieve full personhood. Danticat indicates that truth, open communication, and accountability are essential for healing. Truth allows women of African descent to take an honest, candid inventory of past events and the role they have played in shaping who they currently are. Reflection plays a crucial role in truth telling, as it dissuades women of African descent from living a false reality under a façade of dissimulation. Open communication functions as an anchor to the experiential knowledge

embedded within African diasporic communities. Danticat demonstrates this observation when Sophie candidly questions Granmè Ifé about testing. Open communication allows women of African descent to build solidarity through share experiences, and reconcile ruptured relationships. Accountability encourages women of African descent to actively engage their role in past and current situations; performing constructive critical examinations help women of African descent understand their role as agents of change, rather than victims of oppressive systems. In the final portion of chapter four, I explore Marimba Ani's theoretical framework, *Maat, Sankofa, Ma'at*. I found Ani's interpretation of health, healing, and wellness very fitting for Danticat's novel, specifically because Ani identifies white supremacy as an actual spiritual illness. She identifies African spirituality as a source of healing, particularly because it encompasses moral ethical codes such as, truth, order, and balance. I explore Danticat's use of syncretic storytelling because this form of narration allows her to provide a composite, more accurate depiction of Haiti's history and why it is the way it is. I think one of the most engaging findings that Danticat gestures towards is the mutual accountability among French and some African countries for their role in capturing and selling slaves.

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APPENDIX A: COPYRIGHT PERMISSIONS SANKOFA

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CONCLUSION

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APPENDIX B: COPYRIGHT PERMISSION KONGO COSMOGRAM

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USF Fair Use Worksheet

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 - c. Does my use fit within Section 110 (2) of copyright law: 'performance or display of works in online classrooms (also known as the TEACH Act)?' *see TEACH Act checklist*
3. Is there a license that covers my use?
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CONCLUSION

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