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## **Slain in the Spirit: a Vodun Aesthetic in Selected Works of Simone Schwarz -Bart, Zora Neale Hurston, and Paule Marshall.**

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SLAIN IN THE SPIRIT: A VODUN AESTHETIC IN SELECTED WORKS  
OF SIMONE SCHWARZ-BART, ZORA NEALE HURSTON,  
AND PAULE MARSHALL

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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in

The Department of English

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study, focusing on select novels by women writers of the African diaspora, discovers a surprising commonality among works with obvious geographical, cultural and linguistic differences--an affirmation of the philosophical essence of the Vodun religion as an antidote to Western spiritual and cultural moribundity.

Each of the novels--Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle*, and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*--alludes to the Vodun pantheon, ancestor veneration and/or rituals in order to valorize the holistic Vodun worldview that recognizes the interconnectedness of all living things and the fluidity of boundaries between the visible and invisible worlds. This essential holistic philosophy gives a subtle but powerful unity to each novel and accounts for the novels' overt emphases on community and black folklife. In all three works, the writers employ their Vodun aesthetic to underscore the necessity of an alternative, life-affirming philosophy as a means of triumphing over material circumstances or the internalization of sterile Western materialistic values.

Chapter One sets up the parameters for this study by locating each novel within its socio-historical context.

Additionally, the selected novels are situated within a developing African diasporic literary tradition in which African-derived beliefs have become sources of cultural resistance.

In Chapter Two, I argue that Hurston's novel, analyzed as a Vodun text, shows that the author drew heavily on her previous anthropological research into Vodun. Understanding Hurston's Vodun aesthetic adds to the appreciation of her literary artistry and allows for a new understanding of the protagonist's spiritual quest.

In Chapter Three, I explore Schwarz-Bart's celebration of black Guadeloupan women whose acceptance of adversity as part of their holistic Vodun philosophy enables them to endure the harsh conditions of colonial oppression.

In Chapter Four, I show how Marshall focuses on Vodun rituals as a means of reconnecting a divided self and a divided diasporic community. Marshall underscores the urgency of answering the call to service of the gods through rendering service to the entire community.



## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In Zora Neale Hurston's groundbreaking anthropological work, *Tell My Horse*, she defines Vodun as "a religion of creation and life" (113). The term "Voodoo,"<sup>1</sup> however, conjures up, in the popular imagination of the Christian West, images not of life but of death or evil-Hollywood-inspired mental scenes of walking zombies or closet sorcerers poking pins into Voodoo dolls. This popular notion of the Vodun religion is erroneous, based on half-truths, misconceptions, and outright fabrications. The esoteric nature of Vodun, and its "heathen" African origin, together provide a partial explanation for its insalubrious image in the West; but negative associations with Vodun also arise from misconceptions about its metaphysics. Contrary to popular belief, the essence of Vodun lies not in the performance of malevolent acts of sorcery, but rather in ritualistic practices designed to provide communication with loas (spirits) on earth, who act as intermediaries between the visible world and the invisible, where a single all-powerful God resides.

Ultimately, then, Vodun is a quest for spirituality, and it is this more fundamental concept of the religion that informs the literary texts in this study. My subject

is the employment of an overarching Vodun aesthetic in three twentieth century novels by black women writers of the African diaspora--Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et Vent sur Telumee Miracle* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*. These examples of the female *Bildungsroman* represent, I argue, a post-colonial movement in female diasporic literature to recover and valorize traditional African cultural beliefs as both a positive source of identity and a means of spiritual liberation from white hegemony, in its multiple aspects.

Though African cultural traditions are the means by which each protagonist achieves self-enlightenment and reconnection with her African heritage, Vodun belief is not incidental but rather integral to the liberation that occurs. Each author emphasizes the potential for psychic and physical healing offered by the holistic Vodun philosophy of the interconnectedness of all living things with each other and an invisible spiritual world. Moreover, in varying degrees of intensity, the authors perceive twentieth century Western materialism, as well as lingering imperialism, to threaten black identity, and they offer a Vodun perspective as the solution to the problem.

One source of confusion regarding the true nature of the Vodun religion may stem from its conflation with animism--the belief that all natural elements, such as trees, stones, et cetera, are inhabited by non-material "spirit" gods. While Vodun has animistic elements, the belief system is distinct from animism, as Maya Deren, in *Divine Horsemen*, shows:

Vodoun would seem, at first glance, to be an animistic religion. However, any effort to systematize the Vodoun pantheon in terms of the major elements--earth, air, fire and water--becomes a Procrustean operation which amputates such major divinities as Legba, God of the Crossroads, Ghede, God of the Dead, Erzulie, Goddess of Love, and makes of Ogoun a loa of fire (which is actually but his characterological symbol) instead of the God of War. Moreover, although the loa may reside *in* trees (and, as a matter of fact, in stones, streams, etc.), these serve merely as physical vessels for them; and just as the loa *in* a govi could not at all be properly called the loa of the govi, so the loa cannot be understood as the spirits of the trees or of any physical vessel in which they may be lodged. (86)

Though loas are not as strongly associated with the material as the spirits in animism, nonetheless one of the vital features of Vodun is its emphasis on the here and now. Its gods are real, possessing the practitioners and offering advice and help for dealing with practical issues of the day. Vodun "possession," therefore, constitutes another "normal" aspect of the religious worship, which is

largely misunderstood by the non-initiate, as Deren explains:

It proposes that man has a material body, animated by an *esprit* or *gros-bon-ange*—the soul, spirit, psyche or self—which, being non-material, does not share the death of the body. This soul may achieve [. . .] the status of a *loa*, a divinity, and become the archetypal representative of some natural or moral principle. As such, it has the power to displace temporarily the *gros-bon-ange* of a living person and become the animating force of his physical body. This psychic phenomenon is known as "possession". The actions and utterances of the possessed person are not the expression of the individual, but are the readily identifiable manifestations of the particular *loa* or archetypal principle. (15-16)

In this Vodun world view wherein man and nature, the visible and invisible worlds, good and evil, are all interconnected, the secular and the religious are equally indistinguishable. Furthermore, many elements of black folk life—conjure, rootworking, spirit possession, and herbal medicine—are integrated in its holistic system.<sup>2</sup> Deren writes that one of the major activities of the *houngan* (Vodun priest) is the herbalistic treatment of disease (17). Emphasis is therefore placed on the total well-being of the community, of which the individual is only a part. Beverly J. Robinson notes, in "Africanism and the Study of Folklore," that this holistic concept is shared, in the Americas, by healers variously known as folk doctors, midwives rootworkers, conjurers, hainsters,

hoodoo and voodoo doctors. The healers administer cures through rituals, charms, herbs, concoctions, and religious means (219).

Yet Vodun can be used for malevolent purposes: it can cure illnesses or secure someone's love, but it can also kill an enemy. It is important, therefore, to distinguish the Vodun priests and priestesses (houngans and mambos) concerned with the spiritual and physical well-being of their followers, from those hoodoo and conjure doctors who perform acts such as casting evil spells on innocent victims for a fixed fee. H. Nigel Thomas, in *From Folklore to Fiction*, provides a clear distinction between conjuring and Vodun:

Conjuring must not be confused with Voodhoo or Hoodoo even though the Hoodoo doctor could conceivably be and frequently is a conjurer; Conjuring is intended to be a deadly art; Voodhooism, on the other hand, is a religion whose emphasis is on the spiritual wholeness of the community, a wholeness that includes even the dead members, who then become ancestral spirits. Conjuring is related to sorcery, which is in opposition to Voodhooism as the Christian Devil is opposed to the Christian God. (40)

Thomas argues that conjuring became more acceptable among African slaves in the "New World" insofar as they perceived that the spirits of their ancestors failed to free them from slavery (40). Thomas also makes the excellent point that African social controls to prevent

the use of conjuring on other blacks were absent in the New World because "neither the threat of punishment nor the sense of the clan remained" (40-41).

Although several African-derived religions similar to African Vodun exist in the United States, the Caribbean and Latin America under various names--Hoodoo and Voodoo (North America), Obeah (Jamaica), Santeria (Cuba), Candomble (Brazil), Shango (Trinidad) and Vodun (Haiti)--I have chosen to examine the diasporic novels in this study through the lens of Haitian Vodun only. Vodun is well-recognized as the spiritually empowering force behind the Haitian Revolution, which led to Haiti's independence from France--making Haiti the first Black republic in the Western Hemisphere<sup>3</sup>--and which created a domino effect, inspiring several slave revolts throughout the Americas.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, I focus on Haitian Vodun because no other African-derived religion in the Americas has had such a profound effect on the national psyche of its people as has Haitian Vodun. Although the Vodun church in Haiti and New Orleans developed in reaction to the religious and political domination of slaves by their colonial oppressors, American Vodun remains an underground, marginalized religion.<sup>5</sup>

Michel Laguerre, in *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti*, argues that Haitian Vodun developed "as a politico-religious phenomenon rather than as a strictly religious or psycho-religious phenomenon [. . .] in active opposition to politico-economic domination from metropolitan France" (8). In other words, Vodun, grounded in African metaphysics and influenced by its historical, political, and social realities, is subversive. Laguerre points to the revolutionary aspect of Vodun: "The weekly voodoo dances, announced by the inviting sound of the drums, were the means for contact, for the development of political consciousness and for exchanges of tactics" (55). Yet, Laguerre argues that while Vodun served as "a vehicle for the expression of a separatist political ideology" during the Haitian Revolution, it has also played "more of an integrative than a disruptive role in Haitian society" (10).

Vodun (re)memorizes the cultural traditions of Africa, as well as the American experience of slavery and its aftermath, through its gods and rituals. As a religion of the "here and now" it encourages personal contact with the gods, who encourage, guide, advise, scold, and even punish. Intimacy with the loa is the ultimate goal, achieved through Vodun possession. This

intimacy is facilitated by the spiritual guide (houngan or mambo) who directs the initiate through the folklore; myths; magic (rootworking and conjure); and communal ceremonial rituals revolving around the word or music—storytelling, singing, dancing and drumming. Knowledge of and participation in Vodun empowers its followers to liberate themselves from the social, political and cultural texts of the neo-colonial West. Sharing of a common *Weltanschauung* also ensures group cohesion and cultural continuity.

This study will show that the diasporic novels of Hurston, Schwarz-Bart and Marshall are supported by a body of values and perceptions shaped by the authors' individual experiences of racial, social, and gender identity within the black diasporic folk community,. However, using a Vodun aesthetic all three writers stress the cultural heritage of diasporic peoples as a source of unity among them. Such a validation of African spiritual beliefs is not a twentieth-century phenomenon although, historically, the attitude of many earlier diasporic writers toward African beliefs has been more ambivalent, or even dismissive.

Olaudah Equiano, for example, captured by slavers and brought to the Americas as a child, mentions in his



autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, the spiritual nature of the African world. It is a world perceived to be inhabited by spirits, as illustrated by his initial reaction to the savagery of his kidnappers: "I was persuaded that I had got into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me" (33). Yet, when he refers to African priests and magicians, or wise men, Equiano suggests their seemingly supernatural powers were attributable to their "unbounded influence over the credulity and superstition of the people" (21).<sup>6</sup> This mediatory position through which the author clearly distances himself from the belief system he is describing finds an echo in the autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Here, Douglass mentions the folk belief of rootworking in relation to his fight for freedom, but he is careful not to endorse that instance of folklore which he describes.<sup>7</sup> Instead, his view remains ambiguous:

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. (298)

Whether Douglass' newly-found self-confidence is due to the power of the root given him, or to his own

determination not to be whipped, he does not say. Again, by disavowing any knowledge of the source of his "spirit" of resistance, Douglass carefully distances himself from the belief in any "real" power that the root might hold, and from the world view that sustains this belief.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these early writers' reticence in openly embracing and acknowledging the Vodun cosmology in their work, it has been pointed out that African-American and Caribbean cultures have long posited their existence and intrinsic values by using figures of resistance and overt opposition derived from a Vodun aesthetic. Thus, the "repudiation principle," to use Houston Baker's terminology, played a crucial role in the emergence of a distinct black tradition. Writers of nineteenth century narratives did not only write against their oppressive environment or the social conventions of their times; they also wrote for their lives. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., remarks in *"Race," Writing and Difference*, that "[W]e black people tried to write ourselves out of slavery, a slavery even more profound than mere physical bondage. Accepting the challenge of the great white Western tradition, black writers wrote as if their lives depended on it" (12-13).

From the early days of slavery, "New World" Africans learned to put words to good use. As William Andrews has demonstrated in *To Tell A Free Story*, the master-slave relationship often followed a dialogic pattern in which the terms of the relationship "were often the subject of negotiations in and through dialogic verbal jousts," from jokes to open speech acts of defiance (275). Both Douglass' *Narrative* and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are examples of the power the slaves acquired through their negotiation of speech acts, as in the case of Douglass' confrontation with his master's slave-breaker Covey (103-04), or Jacobs' control over the matter of her liaison with a sympathetic white man in her text (385). Nevertheless, writing in a period when diasporic Africans were reduced to the level of chattel slaves, and enjoyed no rights or privileges--indeed, when their very humanity was denied them, creating the paradoxical phenomenon of having to get their narratives authenticated in order to be published--it is not surprising that references to their cultural beliefs and practices were oftentimes guarded if not prefaced with excuses and apologies. Hence, writers such as Equiano and Douglass only pay lip service to the spiritual "magical" beliefs that undergird black folk culture. I suggest that

this reluctance to identify with specific folk beliefs is connected to their reluctance to embrace another notable aspect of Vodun--ancestor veneration.

Rendering homage to the ancestors, alive and dead, is the cornerstone of Vodun. It is noteworthy that Equiano's recollection of his fondness for his mother in early childhood stops short of recognizing any strong influence she may have exerted on his spiritual and psychological development into manhood. Frederick Douglass' dismissal of his mother is even more marked: "I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger" (256). Given the early removal of the mother figure from their lives, in both narratives, the authors' references to their mothers, while laudatory at times, are fleeting and, significantly, without direct consequence on their growing consciousness. In contrast, within the last few decades, critics have focused attention on the ways Black women writers, as far back as the nineteenth century, embraced and acknowledged the importance of the ancestor in their lives.

In his introduction to *The Classic Slave Narratives*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., comments on the most famous slave narrative written by a woman, Jacobs' *Incidents*:

Jacobs revises the received structure of the genre as practiced by its two great exemplars, Equiano and Douglass, by framing her entire story with descriptions of the inherent strength, dignity, and nobility of her family, and especially that of her maternal grandmother, in whom she "had a great treasure," as she informs her readers in her very first paragraph. In so doing, she engages in one of the earliest examples of literary female bonding in the black tradition [. . .]. In this way, Jacobs stresses not only the central importance of her grandmother in her own life, but also the crucial centrality of female bonding in the life of a slave woman. (xiii)

Jacobs' recognition of her grandmother: "I was indebted to her for all my comforts, spiritual and temporal" (346), recalls the Vodun tradition of ancestor veneration, that is, rendering homage to the ancestors. Jacobs' narrative, however, places emphasis on a Christian, masculinist-influenced sense of morality. Hence the protagonist's extreme unease with forming a sexual liaison with a white man (to avert the unwanted advances of her slave master). As a black slave woman who was neither allowed nor equipped to uphold the unreasonable standards imposed on white womanhood by a white Christian patriarchy, her acceptance of Western standards of morality causes her undue hardships.

Yet, if her text, in part, fails to provide an empowering alternative to this Christian patriarchal model, Jacobs records her resistance to racist and sexist

domination. Strategically withdrawing from public view for seven years, she maintains communication with the outside world via her grandmother. Post-Freudian feminists see this continued connection as part of the female psyche. For them, female identity, which must be thought of as an alternative, rather than an inferior identity, is one that is largely shaped by the privileged relationship with the mother. Furthermore, Nancy Chodorow, in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, comments that "the basic female sense of self is connected to the world: the basic male sense of self is separate" (169). Other feminist critics have expanded Chodorow's argumentation and proposed that a distinctive female self implies a distinctive value system and unorthodox developmental goals, defined in terms of community and empathy rather than achievement and autonomy (Abel et al., *The Voyage In*, 10). Whereas, writes Joanne Braxton and Sharon Zuber, Douglass' *Narrative* emphasizes the struggle for literacy and autonomy, *Incidents* emphasizes another dimension, one of caring and connection. These authors argue that Jacobs reinscribes emotional depths that both the slaveholders and popular male authors of slave narratives had "written out" of slave culture in part to conform to the nineteenth-century ideal of what it meant to be a man.

In twentieth-century works by Black women, critics have also observed the centrality of the mother figure in the healing process in works of the seventies and eighties. Carole Boyce Davies mentions two articles, Gloria Joseph's "Black Mothers and Daughters: Their Roles and Functions in American Society," and Patricia Hill Collins' "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships," which "move beyond the solitary biological imperative to a notion of shared responsibility for caring" (*Black Women, Writing and Identity* 135). In her own article, "Mothering and Healing in Recent Black Women's Fiction," Davies insists that in Black women's novels, biological motherhood is secondary to community or surrogate motherhood, and concludes that "much of this mothering is directed at releasing the inner self being suffocated by race and sex oppression. As each participates in the other's healing, they, by extension, heal themselves in a kind of symbiotic unity" (43). Davies is actually identifying the crucial role of the ancestor and the community in healing the wounded psyche of the individual. This is apparent in the novels under study and reflects the Vodun cosmology of holistic healing which focuses on the one hand, on the individual's mind and body, and on the other hand, on the proper integration

of the individual into the community to which he/she must sublimate personal needs. In the novels under study, the ancestor figures play a crucial role in the healing of the individual. In other words, they provide the necessary tools for spiritual survival in an environment oftentimes hostile to black women. Healing takes place via rituals of storytelling (myths, song, and dance) which recapture the history and culture of the group. Critics such as Joseph M. Murphy, in *Working the Spirit*, have noted that in the African diaspora the texts of the tradition--the songs, prayers, rhythms, gestures, foods, emblems, and clothin--have been transmitted orally and ceremonially.

Language, then, becomes an important factor in the healing process. The question of whether language constructs culture or is constructed by it was hotly debated in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe. Debates on language also have been particularly acute in post-colonial Africa and the Caribbean, largely because, as Martinican psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon reminds us, language is a technology of power: "A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. [. . .] Mastery of language affords remarkable power" (18). In an article entitled "The Politics of Language: Beyond the Gender?", Nelly



Furman asserts that "not only are we born into language which molds us, but any knowledge of the world which we experience is itself also articulated in language." She elaborates that

[I]t is through the medium of language that we define and categorize areas of difference and similarity, which in turn allow us to comprehend the world around us. Male centered categorizations predominate in American English and subtly shape our understanding and perception of reality. (182)

The influence of language on the way one perceives the world, and one's self in relation to the world, in other words the power of language to heal or to harm the psyche constitutes a serious consideration in this study.

The relationship between language and communication, speaking and silence has become an important theme, not only in literature written by black women but in feminist literary criticism and theory as well. Josephine Donovan, in her landmark *Feminist Literary Criticism*, describes feminist criticism as a form of praxis which should, among other things, "enable women—as readers and writers—to break their culture of silence (xiii). Similarly, Barbara Smith, in her groundbreaking essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," remarks that she sought to break the massive silence imposed on black women writers by the male dominated literary establishment. More recently, Cheryl

Wall has edited an anthology of critical essays, *Changing Our Own Words*, by a group of academic critics concerned with making explicit a "positionality" intended to respond to "the false universalism that long defined critical practice and rendered black women and their writing mute" (2). I argue that the writers in this study offer ways of resisting the "othering" and "silencing" installed in the dominant discourses through the use of language as a subversive tool derived from an Vodun aesthetic.

The power of the word, or *Nommo*, is thus very important in oral-based societies. What the ancestor guide gives to African diasporic societies in oral history, cultural information, and ancestral wisdom and knowledge is the means by which all people of African descent can maintain a high level of understanding of their true heritage. Walter Ong writes that "[A]ll the religious traditions of mankind have their remote origins in the oral past and it appears that they all make a great deal of the spoken word" (179). With the transition from orality to literacy, the word still retains its power.

Orality is present in the texts of this study on several levels: in the manner in which the protagonists are introduced to their cultural heritage; in the power of the spoken word to harm or to heal; in the highly poetic

prose; and in the recurrence of proverbs, music, myths, which show clearly the authors' understanding of oral processes and their ingenious use of them to characterize their people. Thus Janie, in search of the language of love but often reduced to silence, will recuperate from its deadening capabilities through the power of speech; likewise the women of the Lougandor family, through positive verbal images, are able to withstand or recuperate from the destructive effects of language. Similarly Marshall's protagonist, Avey, will be brought back to psychic health thorough orally transmitted rituals.

Crucial to this process of self-realization is a call to action. The protagonists all feel impelled to go on a spiritual journey and then to "pass on" the newly acquired knowledge.<sup>9</sup> The call to service in these novels corresponds to the call a Vodun neophyte receives to enter the service of the loas. Once one has received the call, one is forced to comply, under penalty of sickness or worse. Hurston's protagonist, Janie, returns home to enter the service of her ancestor. First, she will tell her tale, the transmission of which she then entrusts to Pheoby: "[M]ah tongue is in mah friend's mouf'" (*Their Eyes* 6). And then she will proceed to venerate the ancestor through

memory.<sup>10</sup> Joan Dayan, in *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, argues for the consideration of Vodun rituals and narrative fiction as repositories of history. In other words, in the same way that Vodun rituals "rememorize" the history and cultural traditions of African descendants in the diaspora, so too, for the writers in this study, telling the tale serves to "rememorize" our history and culture. Telling therefore becomes a form of resistance that counteracts the silence that resulted from colonial and patriarchal oppression.

Thus, while they do not employ the original languages of their African foreparents, these writers combine forms of written narrative that are Western in origin, with the oral style and function of traditional African narrative. As a result, they are able to reach their readers and elicit a participatory response. In this regard, Toni Morrison's comments, in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," are worthy of note:

There are things that I try to incorporate into my fiction that are directly and deliberately related to what I regard as the major characteristics of Black art [. . .]. One of which is the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well. [The Black novel] should try deliberately to make you stand up and make you feel something profoundly in the same way that a Black preacher

requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon  
[. . .]. Because it is the affective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance. (341)

The participatory relationship among Vodouists is clearly manifest in these novels under study.

Vodun is an active religion that demands full participation in its rituals. Rituals of song and dance are an essential performative aspect of the healing process. The oral/literary transmission of the texts memorializes black cultural history; it is mainly through song and dance that Vodun adherents keep in touch with the world of their ancestors. They repeat the songs which pay tribute to their heroes and their gods; and they repeat in dance, the steps which are sometimes re-creation of bold deeds. It is through the movement of dance that the loa are able to be fully present to the congregation. The hounsi (participants) dance around the poteau-mitan and greet it with songs and dances. And in dancing the loa one remembers the ancestor who came and who didn't come to Haiti. Peter J. Paris writes that the healing powers of music among African peoples has "played a similar healing role for African-Americans [. . .] speaking the language of the gods in song, music, and dance as a traditional

method of restoring the cosmic equilibrium that had been seriously ruptured by the experience of slavery" (125). The Vodun rituals which provide an antidote to the alienation that diasporic Africans feel from themselves and each other is a recurrent motif in the texts under study. In fact, the ritual associated with music is often a defining feature in the lives of the couples; and the protagonists' exposure to, and participation in the songs and dances of the folk culture will be a necessary step in their journey towards self-knowledge and healing. In the opening stages of *Their Eyes*, for example, the protagonist, whose sexual awakening is compared to a flute song, only enjoys a meaningful relationship with a man who sings and plays the guitar; and at his funeral she remembers his music: "Janie brought him a brand new guitar and put it in his hands. He would be thinking of new songs to play to her when she got there" (180). Indeed, an essential step in Janie's journey is participation in the songs and dances of the folk in the Florida everglades.

In *Praisesong*, music is also an essential component of Avey Johnson's marriage to Jay. The blues and jazz were Jay's passion and his spiritual sustenance: "The Jay who emerged from the music of an evening, the self that

would never be seen down at the store, was open, witty, playful, even outrageous at times: he might suddenly stage an impromptu dance just for the two of them in the living room" (95). And when Jay's spirit was broken, the music in their lives stopped literally and figuratively. Years later, the climax of Avey's recovery of her spiritual and psychological well-being takes place during her participation in the African dance honoring the ancestors--the Nation Dance. It is only through ritual participation that Avey "felt the threads [. . .] making her a part of what seemed a far-reaching, wide-ranging confraternity" (249).

Music also appears at defining points in the lives of Schwarz-Bart's characters. On the brink of madness, with her marriage to Élie gone awry, Télumée is saved thanks, in part, to the intervention of the village women who came to "chanter des airs gais, des cantiques de délivrance" (*Pluie et Vent* 160). Later, Télumée's spiritual rebirth from the zombifying effect of the cane fields climaxes in her participation in the dance.

In all three novels, the authors demonstrate the importance of the healing power of music and its close connection with communal living. For Murphy, Vodun is a dance, a system of movements which brings people and loas

together in a progressive and mutual relationship of knowledge and growth (17). Deren, for her part, sees Vodun as a collective religion, and participation in the ritual elevates the individual. This is the major function of ritual, she writes, and "rendering participation accessible to the diverse capacities of the individual is the most astonishing achievement of the forms of Vodun, both in song and dance" (229).

The trauma of the Middle Passage, slavery, and its aftermath, could not have been endured without an outlet. In these novels under study, music becomes one of the most effective forms of psychological and cultural resistance. It is the soul rhythm of peoples of the African diaspora. The Vodun drums empowered the slaves to overthrow their masters. Music thus provided psychological, cultural and political resistance, for the drums which called the gods of Africa to possess the devotees also sent messages across the hills in time of rebellion.

Twentieth century black writers, beginning with Charles Chesnutt in *The Conjure Woman*, have employed the folk beliefs and customs of black folk in their fiction in order to provide an alternative cosmological model that spoke of their reality. The loss of myths and rituals in modern Western and westernized societies has contributed



to the sense of alienation from self and from the environment. The writers in this study have drawn on the folklore, myths, rituals, and customs of our people, which I call a Vodun aesthetic, to provide concrete steps towards wholeness, defined as a healing of body and spirit, or a reintegration of the two selves. They emphasize the debilitating effects of assimilating Western values, and promote a return to the spiritual as it is manifested in Vodun. Just as in Vodun the gods are real (they possess the vodouists and can be found everywhere in nature), so too these novelists look not for an externally imposed God or religion but at a divinity arising from interaction with nature, community and self. Yet these women writers also look outwards, for true to their Vodun sensibility, they propose not a complete rejection of Western culture, but rather an incorporation of the outward trappings of the culture to the extent that they can contribute to the quality of life. The very nature of Vodun is syncretic.<sup>11</sup> The incorporation of the outward trappings of Catholicism has enabled Vodun to survive religious and political persecution. In like manner, these women writers are not so much promoting a return to traditional folk practices and lifestyle, which is unrealistic, as they are showing how African peoples can

use these cultural traditions to empower themselves as they struggle in a hostile environment. Edward Said writes, in *Culture and Imperialism*, that "narratives of emancipation and enlightenment in their strongest form were also narratives of *integration* not separation, the stories of people who had been excluded from the main group but who were now fighting for a place in it" (xxvi). Throughout the struggles of their protagonists, these women writers also document the process of personal growth toward positive self-definition.

#### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Multiple spellings exist for the word "Vodun," including the popular American spellings "voodoo" and "hoodoo." In this text I have chosen to use the orthography "Vodun," largely to avoid the negative connotations associated with the American forms.

<sup>2</sup> "Holism" is defined, in *The American Heritage Dictionary*, as "[t]he theory that reality is made up of organic or unified wholes that are greater than the simple sum of their parts."

<sup>3</sup> Serving as a "unifying factor of social cohesion," Vodun catalyzed the Haitian black masses, later joined by the mulattoes, to successfully eliminate the colonial masters (Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics* 10).

<sup>4</sup> See Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics*, 13-17.

<sup>5</sup> In New Orleans, Vodun "had to become a religion practiced in secret in spite of its designation as a bona fide religion in 1945" (Mulira 66). Likewise, the Catholic church, supported by politicians in Haiti, persecuted Vodun followers, forcing them underground (Laguerre 19).

<sup>6</sup> In footnotes, Equiano describes a case of poisoning in the West Indies similar to one in Africa. In both

instances, the perpetrator was discovered by "supernatural" means. The author concludes: "I give this story as it was related by the mate and crew on the ship. The credit of which is due to it, I leave to the reader" (22n).

<sup>7</sup> After being brutally whipped by a slave breaker, another slave assures Douglass that carrying a certain root in his right pocket will prevent any further whipping.

<sup>8</sup> See Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* for further discussion of Douglass' reaction to folk beliefs.

<sup>9</sup> Critics have widely commented on the memorable lines of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, "This is not a story to pass on" (275), showing that, in fact, Morrison meant the opposite—that it was a story to pass on, in order that future generations would remember, and gain strength from the force of that memory.

<sup>10</sup> For Carole Boyce Davies, by having Janie locate her tongue in her friend's mouth, "Hurston demythologizes the power of the tongue, of language." It is, Davies insists, "as much itself a critique of heterosexuality as it is the privileging of language, as it is a recognition of how articulations for the dispossessed can take place (*Black Women, Writing and Identity* 155).

<sup>11</sup> In *Voudoun Fire* Denning and Phillips explore the connections between African, Amerindian, and Vodun religions and also suggest that Egypt assimilated Black African cultures, before re-disseminating it into Africa. They also indicate parallels between ancient Egyptian people and culture, and those of Central and South America. Quoting themselves from an earlier publication, they conclude that "the cult of Voudoun seems to have brought together and revived elements so cognate and yet so long separated that their reunited power is like the release of an arrow" (40).

## CHAPTER TWO

### ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS

A Vodun initiate, and the daughter of a Southern preacher, Zora Neale Hurston possessed a well-documented knowledge of, and interest in, black spirituality. Toni Cade Bambara concludes her introduction to Hurston's writings in *The Sanctified Church* with this telling remark:

The sermons and church pieces, as might be expected from a minister's daughter and a Black-south socialized observer with a perfect-pitch ear, work their way into all of her novels [. . .]. They represent too a life-long concern with spirituality, most hauntingly presented in her masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.(11)

Yet Hurston also makes clear her rejection of institutionalized religion in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

It seems to me that organized creeds are collections of words around a wish. I feel no need for such. [. . .] The springing of the yellow line of morning out of the misty deep of dawn, is glory enough for me. I know that nothing is destructible; things merely change forms.[. . .] The stuff of my being is matter, ever changing, ever moving, but never lost; so what need of denominations and creeds to deny myself the comfort of all my fellow men? [. . .] I am one with the infinite and need no other assurance. (286-87)

Obviously, Hurston's spirituality is not derived primarily from her African-American Christian background. Rather, the primary source of her beliefs is the Vodun faith of

her ancestors. Between 1936 and 1938, she spent a major part of her time in the Caribbean collecting material on Vodun practices; and after spending six months in Jamaica she wrote *Their Eyes in Haiti* (Hemenway 230-31).

Hurston's interest in Vodun also led her to be initiated into one of its highest levels in New Orleans.

According to colonial writer Moreau de Saint-Mery, the fundamental principle of vodouists' beliefs--seeking out the manifestations of Divinity in the forces of nature-- makes it a "pantheism . . . classified by the same standard as ancient pagans or the religions of India" (qtd. in Hurston, *Tell My Horse* 103). Yet pantheism is only one aspect, albeit important, of a more complex Vodun spirituality informing *Their Eyes*.<sup>1</sup> Hurston's multi-faceted exposure to black spiritual traditions has led John Lowe, in *Jump at the Sun*, to remark that Hurston fully embraced neither the Christian nor African-derived concept of religion, for both Western (Christian) and non-Christian religious elements inform her work.<sup>2</sup> Lowe aptly styles the spiritual beliefs in Hurston's work, particularly after her visit to Haiti, as "multicultural, syncretic, and personal" (160). In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, this fusion of beliefs that Lowe describes is particularly observable. However, I argue that the syncretism in *Their*

*Eyes* is a function of, rather than a departure from, an overall Vodun aesthetic.

A fundamental aspect that scholars have discovered regarding Vodun is its ability to assimilate opposing religious elements, without undergoing basic change.

Michel Laguerre, in *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti*, refers to this feature as "magical syncretism" in discussing the acceptance of Catholicism by slaves when Haiti was still a French colony:

Colonial Voodoo syncretism was more a magical than a profoundly religious one. By this I mean that more than anything else, there was a simple accumulation of gestures (the sign of the cross), formulae (psalms, Catholic prayers), images of saints and other cultic objects. This magical syncretism was a kind of precaution: it was thought to be better to rely upon two magics instead of one. (37)

As will be discussed more fully later in this chapter, *Their Eyes* contains one particularly blatant example of "magical syncretism"—a reference by Janie to a Virgin Mary icon--in addition to more subtle blending of Christian religious elements into an overall Vodun aesthetic.

Reading the novel as a Vodun text illuminates an incredibly rich subtext of Vodun allusion that not only informs but actually drives the novel. Beyond its poignant depiction of an idyllic romantic love, multiple critics have considered the significance of *Their Eyes* to

be a black woman's journey to self-discovery. After several unhappy relationships, Janie finally finds a true but short-lived love, which empowers her as a voice. However, to fully appreciate the richness of Hurston's novel, it is necessary to recognize that Janie's ultimate journey--and means of self-discovery and fulfillment--is finding and embracing the true spirituality of her ancestors. Tea Cake's empowering love for Janie and encouragement of her self-expression occurs within a Vodun context--he is a transmitter of Vodun tradition to Janie, introducing her to folk ways and drawing her into community with himself and others. Moreover, the entire text of *Their Eyes*, not simply Janie's relationship with Tea Cake, follows Janie's progressive experience of the reality of various aspects of Vodun belief. The end of the novel marks her blossoming as a fully developed culture-bearer.

Contrary to those critics who have argued that after Tea Cake's death, Janie simply endures or maintains her development, I argue that Janie discovers purpose after his death--she finds spiritual love through integration with the invisible world of the ancestors. Such purpose, not Tea Cake, is the complete fulfillment of the vision of cosmic harmony in nature--her vision of the blooming pear

tree-- which launches her quest for self-discovery and love at the beginning of the novel. The overarching theme of Hurston's novel--the recovery of a Vodun heritage--also discloses a great deal more subversiveness in Hurston's thought and writing than has previously been acknowledged. Through endorsing specific aspects of the Vodun legacy, *Their Eyes* becomes a critique of Western materialism, classism and sexism, including these values as they have infiltrated or informed African diasporic communities.

### **Janie's Cosmic Vision**

The protagonist of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, sixteen-year-old Janie, experiences a vision of cosmic harmony in nature one spring day under a blossoming pear tree near her home:

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. (10-11)

The love embrace in this passage is generally interpreted as a coming-to-sexual consciousness, and a revelation of cosmic harmony in nature. In this sense, Janie's vision touches on the physical, but it goes far beyond the



material to include metaphysical concerns. Janie's vision touches on the dynamics of all relationships in the material and non-material realm. Hurston thus sets the tone of Janie's quest--a quest, inspired by this revelation, for the very meaning of life. The protagonist will use this vision as a paradigm to measure the quality of her own relationships. As she says to her grandmother after marrying the disappointing Logan Killicks: "Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think" (23).

Various critics, ranging from Mary Helen Washington to Ellese Southerland and Barbara Christian, have noticed Hurston's frequent use of natural imagery, including the recurring symbol of the tree, and see these images as indicating Hurston's valuing of life itself. Christian, for example, points out in *Black Feminist Criticism* that Hurston "use[s] metaphors derived from nature's play to emphasize the connection between the natural world and the possibilities of a harmonious social order" (174-75). In other words, Hurston sees human life in community as a primary source of vitality and fulfillment. In *Their Eyes*, critics have recognized the vision of the pear tree as particularly significant, seeing it as a catalyst for Janie's journey for fulfillment, and representative, in

various ways, of her true needs and/or the needs of the human individual in general. However, no significant analysis has been made of the connection between Hurston's natural imagery in *Their Eyes* and a Vodun aesthetic. Southerland, in her article "The Influence of Voodoo on the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston," details numerous Vodun elements in *Their Eyes* and other works by Hurston, but her focus is on identifying the symbols of Vodun ceremony rather than exploring their relationship to the overall themes of Hurston's individual works of fiction. Yet I argue that understanding the Vodun context of Hurston's pear tree symbol and other natural imagery in *Their Eyes* throws light on the deeper meanings of these images for Janie's quest.

Maya Deren explains that in Vodun the tree has multiple significations; it is an instrument of healing and of communication of energy forces between the visible and invisible worlds:

Particularly are trees the great natural highway of such traffic. And the leaves, properly plucked and treated, may therefore carry divine and healing properties. The most ancient of loa are known as *loa racine* (root loa); the songs tell of their "racine sans but" (root without end) [. . .]. And if one or another tree is particularly consecrated to this loa or that, it is [. . .] in the sense of that tree as a preferred avenue of divine approach. (36)<sup>3</sup>

Janie's revelation under the pear tree not only launches her on a quest for the delight of marriage as community, it paints for her a vision of the ultimately divine energy of life and of the fulfillment of entering into communion with, or participation in, that life. Physical communion with the natural world, including the marriage partner, is the point of access to the spiritual or divine energy of life.

Other Vodun symbols in *Their Eyes*, highlighting, like the pear tree, points of access to the spiritual world, are crossroads and gates. Deren explains the significance of these images in Vodun as follows: "The crossroads [. . .] is the point of access to the world of les Invisibles, which is the soul of the cosmos, the source of life, the cosmic memory, and the cosmic wisdom" (35). It is noteworthy that immediately following her revelation, Janie goes to the front gate of her grandmother's house where she sees and kisses Johnnie Taylor--an incident which profoundly disturbs her grandmother, and which serves as a catalyst for Janie's forced marriage to the middle-aged Logan Killicks. Filled with doubt at the prospect of marrying this unattractive older man, Janie goes "back and forth to the pear tree continuously wondering and thinking" (20). Clearly, the prospect does

not conform to the harmonious sexual and spiritual union Janie had witnessed under the tree. Gates and crossroads will symbolize turning points in her life throughout the novel. They underscore Janie's choices to continue questing for access to the invisible world, her pursuit of the spiritual.

While Vodun symbols in *Their Eyes* emphasize the ultimately spiritual nature of Janie's quest, Hurston also develops a Vodun aesthetic to indicate the quality of Janie's relationships. Christian and others have shown that in all three of Janie's marriages, the men are defined, both figuratively and literally, by their closeness to the natural world and particularly to the tree. Hurston provides clear indices of the viability of Janie's marriages through imagery that indicates the degree of connection between the men and nature. For instance, when Janie envisions marriage to her middle-aged and unattractive suitor: "The vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree" (13). In opposition to the life-giving forces of the tree, Killicks represents the image of death for Janie: "He look like some ole skullhead in de grave yard" (13), she tells Nanny. Critics have also pointed to the association of the name "Kill/licks" with violence and destruction. The absence of positive

associations between Killicks and the natural world is also reinforced in Janie's description of her husband's toe-nails, which "look lak mule foots" (23). Negative imagery is not limited to his person, for even his home is described as "a lonesome place like a stump in the middle of the woods" (20). The "stump" image further indicates Killicks' lack of vitality and self-imposed isolation from the life of the community. Sexual disinterest is compounded by philosophical incompatibility. Janie is forced to marry a man who can provide her with material comforts and protection, but Janie scorns these attributes: "Ah ain't takin' dat ole land tuh heart neither. Ah could throw ten acres of it over de fence every day and never look back to see where it fell" (22), she tells Nanny. Not surprisingly, given all these indices, the marriage is doomed to failure. It reaches its climax when Killicks, less than a year into their marriage, attempts to turn Janie into Nanny's idea of the oppressed black woman--"de mule uh de world"--by suggesting that she "tote" the wood inside (25), by going in search of a mule "all gentled up so even uh woman kin handle 'im" (26), and later by asking Janie to help him "move dis manure pile befo' de sun gits hot" (29-30). In every instance of Killicks being associated with the

natural world, he is depicted negatively. The marriage is over for Janie, who realizes that despite Nanny's exhortations and assurances her marriage with Killicks will never conform to her vision under the pear tree. When Killicks begins to make unreasonable demands on Janie, she realizes that "[t]he familiar people and things had failed her so she hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off" (24). Soon, along the road comes Joe (Jody) Starks.

Again, Hurston's use of natural imagery provides a clear indication that this next relationship is doomed. To begin with, Jody does not represent "sun-up and pollen and blooming trees," although Janie goes with him because he speaks for "far horizon," for "change and chance" (28). The horizon has a very powerful connotation in Vodun. Lois Wilcken, in *The Drums of Vodou*, explains quite cogently its significance within the Vodun belief system:

Vodou believers say that the cosmos is divided along two axes. A horizontal axis, whose metaphor is the surface of the sea, separates the living from the dead, that is, the spirits of all those who have lived and all those who are yet to live reside beneath the sea, or *anba dlo*. Like an umbilical cord, a vertical axis intersects the horizon, creating a nexus between the spiritual and physical worlds.[. . .] At birth, each of us confronts the cosmic mirror (another metaphor for the horizon, or the surface of the sea), and the reflection he/she sees there is the spirit that lives within throughout life. (21-22)

Janie's hopes for a spiritual connection with Jody are dashed early in the marriage because he does not speak for the "far horizon" as she had initially thought. The reflection of herself Janie sees during her life with him, the spirit that constitutes her essential self, cannot synchronize with Jody's. In fact, she has simply moved from one form of spiritual death, to another. Once more, figurative and literal associations with nature, throughout the course of their marriage, tell the story. First, Hurston repeats the juxtaposition of the dead wood and the living, pear-tree image, used earlier with Killicks, when Joe Starks and Janie are about to meet officially with the citizens of Eatonville, their new home town. Having bought lumber with which to build his new store, Jody delays the meeting because he "meant to count every foot of that lumber before it touched the ground" (38). But the people discover his location and go to meet him "where the new lumber was rattling off the wagon and being piled under the big live oak tree" (38). Secondly, Joe's decision to count the dead wood before meeting with the community, represented by the live oak tree, reflects his entrepreneurial mentality that leads to exploitation (of human and natural resources), and also

alienates both him and Janie, to her chagrin, from the community:

Janie soon began to feel the impact of awe and envy against her sensibilities. The wife of the Mayor was not just another woman as she had supposed. She slept with authority and so she was part of it in the town mind. She couldn't get but so close to most of them in spirit. (44)

During the following years Jody, elected mayor, acquires more and more property and wealth; and Hurston will constantly pit his capitalistic, materialistic philosophy, against Janie's people-oriented, holistic philosophy of interaction and symbiosis with the natural world and its occupants.

The incident with Matt Bonner's mule encapsulates their opposing worldviews. The town had been cruelly teasing the old, half-starved mule, and Janie was upset:

She snatched her head away from the spectacle and began muttering to herself. "They oughta be shamed uh theyselves! Teasin' dat poor brute beast lak they is! Done been worked tuh death; done had his disposition ruint wid mistreatment, and now they got tuh finish devilin' 'im tuh death. Wisht Ah had mah way wid 'em all." (53)

Jody overhears Janie's muttered protest and decides to buy the mule's freedom, thereby impressing the entire town, including Janie, with his generosity: "The town talked it for three days and said that's just what they would have done if they had been rich men like Joe Starks" (55).



Jody's self-interestedness in purchasing the mule stands in contrast to Janie's altruism. For her, the mule is one of the "helpless things" for which "[p]eople ought to have some regard" (54); for Jody, buying the mule is merely a way to enhance his prestige in the community.

Another example of the philosophical differences between the couple is dramatized when the mule eventually dies of old age. It had become a favorite storytelling subject among the town members, so they throw a great ceremony out in the swamp and personify the mule, beginning with a eulogy on "our departed citizen" by Jody. Another man, Sam, speaks of "the joys of mule-heaven to which the dear brother had departed this valley of sorrow; the mule-angels flying around; the miles of green corn and cool water, a pasture of pure bran with a river of molasses running through it" (57). Following the eulogizing of the mule, "the sisters got mock-happy and shouted and had to be held up by the menfolks" (57). While everybody has fun, Janie is left to tend the store. Understandably upset about not being allowed to take part in the wonderful mock ceremony, she is more so when Jody, to cover his own enjoyment and defensive sense of guilt, chooses to berate the people's fun-loving ways:

Ah had tuh laugh at de people out dere in de woods dis mornin', Janie. You can't help but laugh at de capers they cuts. But all the same. Ah wish mah people would git mo' business in 'em and not spend so much time on foolishness.(59)

Janie's response, that it is natural for people to want to laugh and play, underscores the lack of play, pleasure and sensuality--which she sorely misses--in her own life.

Much of Vodun ritual involves the spirit of creative play.

The disjunction between Janie's and Jody's opposing worldviews affects every aspect of their existence, including the area of sexuality. Once again Hurston employs imagery taken from nature to underscore the end of pleasure, sexual and otherwise, in their marriage: the bed is "no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in" and she is "petal-open" with him no more (67). Janie's inability to achieve emotional, physical, and psychological fulfillment results in deliberate psychological distancing. Faced with the prospect, if she leaves Jody, of being a penniless and unprotected black woman in a hostile white world, she opts to stay in the loveless marriage. To save herself from psychic disruption, however, she learns to separate her true self, the reflection in the cosmic mirror, from the self she displays to Starks and to the world:

The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again. So she put something in there to represent the spirit like a Virgin Mary image in a church. (67)

This passage reveals Hurston's Vodun sensibility through the double entendre implicit in the use of the word "spirit." Besides its literal denotation, "spirit" can also connote the Vodun goddess of unrequited love, Erzulie. The mention of the Virgin Mary image as representative of the spirit of the marriage reinforces this idea. In the Christian tradition, the Virgin Mary epitomizes virtue, chastity, and the evacuation of sexuality; in New World Vodun, the Virgin icon has been appropriated to represent Erzulie, the goddess of love who rejects love.<sup>4</sup> The mention of the image, in a context of loss of sensuality in Janie's conjugal life, underscores Hurston's understanding of the true significance of the Vodun divinity.

Also significant is Janie's first experience of her sexual and spiritual consciousness under a tree, because the tree now becomes, for Janie, an imaginary place of refuge that enables her to sublimate her desires: "[O]ne day she sat and watched the shadow of herself going about tending store and prostrating itself before Jody, while

all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and her clothes" (73). Janie seeks out this place of healing as a sanctuary where she can nurture her thoughts:

She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them. (68)

Janie's ability to separate her two selves accomplishes the purpose of keeping her true self intact and inviolable, as she patiently awaits the man corresponding to the vision that will enable her once again to integrate her two selves.

After Jody's death, it is significant that the first thing Janie does is look at herself in the mirror:

Years ago, she had told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass.[. . .] She went over to the dresser and looked hard at her skin and features. The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. (83)

Janie is open, once again, to the possibilities of realizing spiritual fulfillment. Her disharmonious marital relationships, at variance with Janie's vision, and depicted through negative associations with the animal and vegetal world, give way to an almost complete reversal in Janie's final marriage to Tea Cake.

In contrast to Killicks and Starks, this penniless and spontaneous younger man is, from the onset, presented as Janie's visionary ideal: Tea Cake, thinks Janie, "could be a bee to a blossom--a pear tree blossom in the spring" (101). Ann Morris and Margaret Dunn, in "Flora and Fauna in Hurston's Florida Novels," note that "[t]hroughout the novel, Janie's relationship with this man called Tea Cake (his real name is Vergible Woods) is associated with nature and springtime" (8). Talking about her romance, Janie tells her friend, Pheoby: "Dis ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game" (108). Indeed, Tea Cake provides an alternative worldview to that of Janie's former husbands, defined by the pursuit of wealth and social standing, and the absence of meaningful interpersonal relationships. Tea Cake, on the contrary, is devoid of concern for material possessions except for immediate pleasure (he buys a car only to take Janie on a picnic; he gambles away her money and then wins it back). Furthermore, he invites Janie to share in both work and play simply for the joy of sharing with her. Thus the guitar-playing Tea Cake brings music, literally and figuratively, into Janie's life. Music functions within

the African diaspora as a means of maintaining links with the homeland, including its spirituality.

In this novel, Tea Cake's association with music is not gratuitous. To begin with, it is instrumental in drawing the couple together. In the early stages of their courtship, Janie is assailed by self-doubt and decides that she will discourage him from future visits to the store. Sensing Janie's reticence, Tea Cake waits

a week exactly to come back for Janie's snub. It was early in the afternoon and she and Hezekiah were alone. She heard somebody humming like they were feeling for pitch and looked towards the door. Tea Cake stood there mimicking the tuning of a guitar. He frowned and struggled with the pegs of his imaginary instrument watching her out of the corner of his eye with that secret joke playing over his face. Finally she smiled and he sung middle C, put his guitar under his arm and walked on back to where she was.(96)

The next night, Tea Cake brings fish for them to have a meal, and afterwards he goes to her piano and "began playing blues and singing, and throwing grins over his shoulder. The sounds lulled Janie to soft slumber and she woke up with Tea Cake combing her hair and scratching the dandruff from her scalp"(99). Trudier Harris, in her article, "Our People, Our People," compares Tea Cake to the roving bluesman with his carefree lifestyle, his guitar slung over his shoulder, and Janie to the "good blueswoman able to make the roving man give up his

traveling ways—or at least take her along with him.” Both Tea Cake and Janie, adds Harris, find folk counterparts in

the romantic men who have no material attachments to the world, who want little more than the comfort of music and a place to lay their heads at the end of the day [. . .] they belong to the air and to a tradition that they have the pleasure of representing for a short time in its long continuum. Their needs are small; their complaints are few; their vision is larger than that of those mired in the clay around them.(33)

Compatibility of vision, therefore, distinguishes Janie and Tea Cake from those who are “mired in the clay” of worldly concerns to the detriment of their spiritual self. For Hurston, the achievement of oneness with self and with one’s environment, physical and spiritual, involves a renunciation of the material to some degree. This is what Janie does when she leaves house and store, marries Tea Cake, and wholeheartedly follows the “roving bluesman” to the Florida Everglades, also known as the “muck,” where they fall in “sync” with the natural world:

Janie fussed around the shack making a home while Tea Cake planted beans. After hours they fished. Every now and then they’d run across a party of Indians in their long, narrow dug-outs calmly winning their living in the trackless ways of the ‘Glades.(124)

In addition to fishing with Janie, Tea Cake teaches her to hunt:

She got to the place she could shoot a hawk out of a pine tree and not tear him up. Shoot his head off. She got to be a better shot than Tea Cake. They’d go

out any late afternoon and come back loaded down with game. One night they got a boat and went out hunting alligators. Shining their phosphorescent eyes and shooting them in the dark. They could sell the hides and teeth in Palm Beach besides having fun together till work got pressing.(125)

These positive associations with the natural world stand in stark contrast to Hurston's depictions of Killicks' and Jody's negative entrepreneurial links with their environment. Fishing and hunting provide Janie and Tea Cake with a means of survival, rather than random exploitation of nature's gifts. They live from day to day, without concern for accumulating wealth, but simply to share with each other, and the community, the joy of their company.

This is the ethos of life for the migrant bean pickers in the Everglades: "They made good money [. . .]. So they spent good money. Next month and next year were other times. No need to mix them up with the present" (126). In this communal atmosphere, their house serves as a "magnet" with Tea Cake and his music the main attraction: "Some were there to hear Tea Cake pick the box; some came to talk and tell stories, but most of them came to get into whatever game was going on or might go on" (127).



The communal spirit on the muck, as well as Janie's active participation in community activities, moves her towards a deepening awareness of self. She is able to look back at her life in Eatonville and laugh at the change in her lifestyle both physically and emotionally:

What if Eatonville could see her now in her blue denim overalls and heavy shoes? The crowd of people around her and a dice game on her floor! She was sorry for her friends back there and scornful of the others. The men held big arguments here like they used to do on the store porch. Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest.(127-28)

Their home serves as a focal meeting point. Here on the muck, everyone is on an equal level socially and Tea Cake is well loved by his peers--unlike Jody who was admired for his possessions but resented by the community for his heavy-handedness in his business dealings, and his overbearing, intimidating personality. The congeniality and sense of community on the muck tolerate no exclusions.

Hurston introduces the African diasporic connection when the Bahamians, befriended by Tea Cake and Janie, "quit hiding out to hold their dances when they found that their American friends didn't laugh at them as they feared." Indeed, they "began to hold dances night after night in the quarters, usually behind Tea Cake's house" (146). Hurston is aware of the Vodouists in Haiti

and New Orleans, who often had to hide in order to perform their ceremonies and to play the drums. Hurston's novel also demonstrates her consciousness of the need to overcome cultural disconnections among peoples of the diaspora as a result of internalizing white prejudice. This is a theme fully developed in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*. In *Their Eyes*, not only does music serve to bring the diasporic family together, but Hurston is able to inject the notion of an African matrix, a common cultural and spiritual source, that should bind diasporan peoples together. The African matrix is introduced through the Bahamian, Lias' off-hand mention of Africa, as he flees the impending hurricane: "If Ah never see you no mo' on earth, Ah'll meet yu in Africa" (148). This notion of a return to the Motherland after death is a Vodun belief which not only empowered the Haitian slaves to fight fearlessly during the Haitian Revolution, but accounted for the innumerable instances of suicide among slaves both during the Middle Passage and during the period of slavery throughout the Americas.

As they hunt and fish, play games, and dance to the compelling rhythms of the Bahamian drums on the muck, Janie moves towards a higher level of self-knowledge. She realizes her own creative power as she learns, in Cyrena

Pondrom's words, "to rejoice in the creative forces of the universe, the forces that animate the plants of the fertile muck" (qtd. in Morris and Dunn 8). These forces, unlike the God in institutionalized religions, are considered real.

In Hurston's *Their Eyes*, divinity is represented as both constructive and destructive forces. Gay Wilentz, in his article "Defeating the False God: Janie's Self-Determination in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," suggests there are two distinct concepts of God in Hurston's novel: the first, the concept of a supreme being governing humanity, is manifested when the seasonal workers in the community are debating whether or not to leave the area and "their eyes were watching God" (*Their Eyes* 151); the second, the product of white hegemony, is implied in the numerous references made to God as "bossman" and "Ole Massa." When, for example, "a big burst of thunder and lightning" stops Tea Cake and Motor from playing cards, Janie comments: "Ah'm glad y'all stop dat crap-shootin' even if it wasn't for money," [. . .] "Ole Massa is doin' His work now. Us oughta keep quiet" (150). According to Wilentz, God appears at those times as a "capricious slave master whose whims and dangerous acts are uncontrollable" ("Defeating the False

God" 286). Furthermore, Wilentz argues, this capricious force represents the white god who is unwilling to listen to a black woman's plea. Against this false god, the writer continues, Hurston opposes the true god or divinity who can be appealed to, and who one can hold accountable for its actions. I suggest an alternative reading of the divinity present in *Their Eyes*. It is represented by Janie's holistic vision at the beginning of the novel--and relates to a Vodun spirituality which Maya Deren explains as follows:

If divinity is understood as a reference to principle (whether of life, death, love or affinity, war or conflict, etc.), the insistence of the primitive that all physical phenomena are animated by divinity, his refusal to conceive of accidental--i.e unprincipled phenomena, and his conviction that even the most minor detail is an expression of a major force--these beliefs are consistent extensions of the conviction that the universe is completely integrated and entirely logical, however devious or obscure that logic may sometimes seem. *The Vodoun loa do not have a supernatural prerogative of arbitrary decision. An event which, to the serviteur, does not seem logical is not accepted with good grace as the "will of God"; on the contrary, the serviteur is aggressive in calling the loa to account and in exacting the explanation to which he feels entitled and which would indicate the corrective procedure he should follow.* (89; emphasis mine)

The paradoxical nature of Vodun is inherent in this perspective: on the one hand, that the gods be propitiated, and on the other hand, that one can demand an explanation of their actions. Such is the reading I would

apply to the scene in which Janie is told that Tea Cake is almost certain to die, and she looks up:

Did He *mean* to do this thing to Tea Cake and her? It wasn't anything she could fight. She could only ache and wait. Maybe it was some big tease and when He saw it had gone far enough He'd give her a sign. She looked hard for something up there to move for a sign. A star in the daytime, maybe, or the sun to shout, or even a mutter of thunder. Her arms went up in a desperate supplication for a minute. It wasn't exactly pleading, it was asking questions. The sky stayed hard looking and quiet so she went inside the house. God would do less than He had in His heart.  
(169)

Janie's questioning posture and waiting for a tangible, reassuring sign--"A star in the daytime, maybe, or the sun to shout, or even a mutter of thunder"--harks back to a time when the gods were real, manifested themselves constantly, and entered into direct communication with believers.

Anna Lillois provides, in her article "'The Monstropolous Beast': The Hurricane in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," another interesting interpretation of the divinity, arguing that Janie finds God in the eye of the hurricane, which represents "a void through which one may pass out of the world of space and time into spacelessness and timelessness" (Ciriot 155). More to the point, Lillois suggests that Janie "comes in touch with God as the

creator of earthly disturbances and maker of destinies," but that Hurston "drops the notion of God in the rest of the book and does not elucidate Janie's spiritual development" (Lillois 91). If the "notion of God" is limited to direct reference to a supreme being, one might concur with this argument. But if "God" refers to a sense of spirituality or divinity that permeates nature and encompasses an entire way of life, as is evidenced in Vodun, then I would suggest that "God" remains a strong presence after the hurricane, and that Janie's spiritual journey continues to unfold thereafter.

The chapter immediately following the hurricane episode, for example, opens with a metaphoric reference to a destructive divinity:

And then again Him-with-the square-toes had gone back to his house. He stood once more and again in his high flat house without sides to it and without a roof with his soulless sword standing upright in his hand. His pale white horse had galloped over waters, and thundered over land. The time for dying was over. It was time to bury the dead. (160)

In this passage, Hurston again clearly alludes to an avenging divinity who, having wreaked havoc with human lives, leaves humans to deal with the consequences.

Nor is the hurricane the simple plot device that John Lowe contends it is. Lowe has noted that "most of

the hurricane-genre books routinely use the storm as Hurston does, placing it at the end of the book to bring the narrative to an exciting conclusion" (*Jump at the Sun* 203 n 25). Hurston's novel, however, does not follow the pattern of the hurricane-genre books. Rather, the hurricane is integral to the spiritual journey. The tragic consequences after "[t]he mother of malice had trifled with men" (*Their Eyes* 161) are crucial to a fuller understanding of the outcome of the plot. Ironically, Tea Cake--the only one of Janie's husbands who is depicted in symbiosis with nature--refuses to heed the signs of the impending hurricane: the Seminoles, rabbits, possums, snakes, rattlesnakes, a panther, and last but not least, the Bahamians, all head east, out of harm's way. However, when Lias observes that the crow and the Indians are going east, Tea Cake responds in a most uncharacteristic manner:

Indians don't know much uh nothin', tuh tell de truth. Else dey'd own dis country still. De white folks ain't gone nowhere. Dey oughta know if it's dangerous. You better stay heah, man. Big jumpin' dance tuhnight right heah, when it fair off. (148)

bell hooks, in "Zora Neale Hurston: A Subversive Reading," has suggested that his ego got in the way of common sense. It is certainly uncharacteristic that Tea Cake, depicted as a "child of nature," should give more credence to the white man's beliefs than to those who live in symbiosis

with the natural world. It is even more uncharacteristic of him to privilege money: "Man, de money's too good on the muck.[. . .] Ah wouldn't leave if Ah wuz you" (*Their Eyes* 148). Rather than ego, as bell hooks suggests, Tea Cake's misreading of, or refusal to read, the signs from the natural world--and those who live close to it--seems to stem from a lack of responsibility. It is a trait which was earlier signaled in his nonchalance over taking Janie's money without asking, and his spending some on his friends, and gambling away the rest, during the entire night. All the while, Janie remains frantic because she is unaware of his whereabouts. Tea Cake's insouciance about the hurricane turns out to be a fatal flaw. Rendered rabid after being bitten by a mad dog while attempting to save Janie from the flood, he tries to kill Janie, who shoots him in self-defense. His death triggers a most dramatic court scene pitting the community on the muck against Janie. She is exonerated from all blame in Tea Cake's death, reunites with the community, and finally returns to Eatonville where she tells her story to her best friend, Pheoby.

A most significant event, however, takes place at the very end of the novel. Critics such as Hazel Carby argue that Tea Cake has to die so Janie can assert her self



(first, in killing him, and secondly, by successfully defending herself in court). Similarly, Lillois sees the hurricane as a "means for Janie to evolve beyond her relationship with Tea Cake" (92). Yet, Janie appears to evolve in a different sense from that suggested here. If, arguably, her quest for love and for self-knowledge begins with her marriage to Tea Cake--for whom she experiences a "self-crushing love," and because of whom "her soul crawled out from its hiding place" (122)--Janie's full attainment of self-knowledge does not take place during the courtroom scene, or during her marriage to Tea Cake, as has been suggested. The climax of Janie's spiritual journey actually occurs after she returns to Eatonville, tells her story, and then goes up to her room where she thinks about the sad events:

Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking.(183)

Despite Tea Cake's obvious flaws, his relationship with Janie, characterized by a selfless love, results in her decision to venerate his memory. Janie, in deciding to devote the rest of her life to keeping Tea Cake's memory alive, enters into full communion with the spirit of her

deceased husband. The lwa is "the key to understanding one's own character," writes Joseph Murphy, "and the relationship with the lwa represents a knowledge of self" (41). Murphy goes on to describe the mystical union between the lwa and the serviteur as one in which "the faithful serviteur is brought along a path of ever deepening understanding of the world and its ways" (40). If the purpose of the spiritual journey is to experience oneness with the gods through possession, then Janie's quest--in which, incidentally, Tea Cake fulfills the role of spiritual guide much more than does Nanny--climaxes at the point where the spirit of Tea Cake enters into communion with her.

Similarly Hurston, who had sacrificed her own love interest for the pursuit of creative endeavors, claims that although the plot was "far from the circumstances," she "tried to embalm all of the tenderness of [her] passion for him" in her depiction of Tea Cake and Janie's love story (qtd. in Hemenway 231). Through her writing of this novel, Hurston has consecrated her love for A.W.P. to memory for eternity. The book has come full circle from its beginning: "women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want

to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly" (1).

### **Subversion of False Gods**

For African diasporic writers, the ancestor (generally female, or androgynous) is the embodiment of black cultural traditions. In the novels of this study, the ancestor figure conjures away the evils manifest within society by empowering the protagonist, spiritually and psychologically. Furthermore, the relationship between the ancestral guide and the protagonist is based on reciprocity: the ancestor passes on the traditions and history of her "tribe" to ensure cultural continuity; the protagonist, having received these "pearls of wisdom," will enter into spiritual communion with and venerate the ancestor. Hurston--an expert storyteller--plays on the trope of the ancestor figure, giving it a broader application which transcends limitations of gender, age, or blood relation.

*Their Eyes*, as I have argued, ends on a poignant note as Tea Cake, an unconventional figure at best, rises to the rank of ancestor and lives on through Janie. Yet, early in the novel, the reader is introduced to another more traditional-seeming ancestor figure, Janie's biological grandmother. Using imagery taken from nature,

Nanny, is significantly described as the "[f]oundation of ancient power that no longer mattered," with a head and face which "looked like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm" (12). Hurston is obviously aware of Nanny's traditional role as the ancestor, but she also is fully aware that the oppression of New World slavery has often damaged the transmitters of black cultural traditions. The metaphorical linkage to a severely damaged tree therefore suggests that Nanny no longer possesses the conjuring power (symbolized by the tree) of the traditional spiritual guide. Nanny is therefore linked to Logan Killicks and Joe Starks, for she will prove to be the figurative remains of a tree from which life has departed. The extent of her disempowerment will become more evident as Nanny narrates her story.

This ancestor does assume the role of storyteller, one of the major roles of the ancestor, following her distress at seeing Janie kissing the "trashy nigger," the "no breath-and-britches" Johnny Taylor (12). Nanny's tale, which chronicles her life as a poor black woman during slavery, can be summarized as follows: Raped and impregnated by the slave master, threatened by his wife with a severe whipping after giving birth, she escapes with her newborn to the neighboring swamp from whence she

emerges, several weeks later, into an emancipated slave society. The following years are characterized by penury, back-breaking domestic work, the rape and emotional breakdown of her cherished daughter, Leafy, and the raising of Leafy's daughter, Janie. Thus does Nanny explain Janie's lineage and the reason she desires to see her granddaughter do what she could not do, which is to "fulfill [her] dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do" (15). However, claiming that she could not "die easy thinkin' maybe de menfoks white or black is makin' a spit cup outa [Janie]" (19), Nanny undermines her powerful discourse on black womanhood--celebrated by feminist critics such as Barbara Christian and others--by using Western materialistic values as her frame of reference.

Marriage, for her, is defined by the protection and by the social standing which a woman gains from a preferably wealthy husband. Never having experienced love (she rejected men after emancipation in order to protect her daughter), Nanny does not consider love an essential component in marriage. So when Janie complains about the continuing absence of love after two months of marriage to Logan Killicks, Nanny responds that love is "just what's got us uh pullin' and uh haulin' and sweatin' and doin' from can't see in de mornin' till can't see at night" (22).

For her, love is an emotion that traps women in relationships with poor men. The materialistic parameters Nanny uses for defining a suitable marriage lead to her perspective that sixteen-year-old Janie should be satisfied with the unattractive, middle-aged Logan Killicks because he's got "de onliest organ in town amongst colored folks," in addition to "a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land" (22). While, in other women's literature of the Black diaspora, and the other novels in this study in particular, the traditional ancestor figure is generally emboldened by her difficult life experiences to transmit a story of resistance to the false values of Western hegemonic culture, Nanny has passed on her story to Janie in order to persuade her to adopt Western values by marrying Killicks.

In addition, unlike the traditional ancestor whose wisdom derives from his/her firm anchorage in black folk culture, Nanny's description of her people, "You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots" (15), ironically attests to her own physical and imaginative inability to embrace her people, whose "roots" go back to the cultural matrix, Africa. Instead, she proposes "good white people" (18), such as her employer, Mrs. Washburn, as models to imitate or emulate: "You got yo' lawful husband

same as Mis' Washburn or anybody else!" (21) she says, when Janie pays her a visit after marrying Killicks. Nanny's worldview conforms to her experientially-shaped belief that the white man is "de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out," and conversely that the "nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (14). Without a healthy sense of racial pride, this biological ancestor's discourse cannot elevate or inspire her granddaughter. Ironically, Nanny desires a better life for Janie, though she invokes her own damaged state in order to manipulate Janie to submit to a loveless marriage: "Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie, Ah'm a cracked plate" (19), she begs. Nanny will subsequently die heartbroken (at Janie's unhappiness in marriage), and unmourned.

Years later, following Joe Starks' death, Janie thinks of trying to find her mother and tending to her grandmother's grave, but she realizes that

she had no interest in that seldom-seen mother at all. She hated her grandmother and had hidden it from herself all these years under a cloak of pity. She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of people[. . .]. But she had been whipped like a cur dog, and run off down a back road after things.[. . .] Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon[. . .] and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her. *She hated the old woman who had*

*twisted her so in the name of love. (85; last emphasis mine)*

Unfortunately, Nanny's deep love for Janie could not overcome her own sense of the limitations of the black woman. In contrast to the conjure woman, Nanny is cast in the role of the "mammy" figure, a stereotypical image that has been associated with weakness and with selfless devotion to her white oppressors.

Carole Boyce Davies writes that "the selflessness of the 'mammy' is positioned against or along with a series of deliberate self-constructions by Black women," adding that "Motherhood and/or mothering thus become central and defining tropes in Black female reconstruction" (135).

However, because Nanny has hurt Janie by worshipping the false gods of materialism in Western culture, Janie rejects her female ancestral lineage, showing no interest in finding her mother, or in visiting her grandmother's grave. Nanny thus loses her chance at immortality. Janie has no interest in venerating this damaged ancestor through memory.

Perhaps Hurston's expressed authorial purpose in writing this love story helps to account for the protagonist's rejection of the ancestor who denies the importance of love. When Janie eventually finds love in a



relationship with Tea Cake, he is doubly significant, not only as the beloved husband, but also because he teaches her the "maiden language" of love (109).

Before she arrives at this point, however, Janie must undertake a journey to self-knowledge. Disappointed in Nanny and in her marriage to Killicks, Janie realizes that "[t]he familiar people and things had failed her." In consequence, "she hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off. She knew now that marriage did not make love" (24). "Mother," writes Paula Eleanor Morgan in her unpublished dissertation, *Black Women Writers and the Bildungsroman*, "is mother tongue rooted in the earliest language of love" (269). Janie's desire to find a new language and new starting points from which to express a reality leads her, once again, to the crossroads. She meets and leaves with Joe Starks, optimistic that "[f]rom now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything" and that "[h]er old thoughts were going to come in handy now, but new words would have to be made and said to fit them" (31).

### **Subversion of Silencing and Voicing**

Edward Said writes, in *Culture and Imperialism*, that the "power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and

imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them" (xiii). Such a disempowering blocking of narration is graphically illustrated in *Their Eyes*. Yet by the end of the novel, one realizes that Hurston has not only subverted the white racist hegemony which silences African-Americans in general (a relic of imperialism), but also a patriarchal system (of both Western and African origin) which deprives the black woman of voice.

During Janie's murder trial (Tea Cake is dead, having been shot by Janie in self-defense), the community on the muck want to speak on behalf of their deceased friend, Tea Cake: "All they wanted was a chance to testify" (177). But the white power structure will not recognize their speaking voice. Thus, when Sop-de-Bottom attempts to speak out "anonymously from the anonymous herd," he is brutally silenced by the prosecutor: "If you know what's good for you, you better shut your mouth up until somebody calls you" (177-78), the prosecutor says coldly. Along with this graphic example of the silencing of the black voice by the white community, one also sees another level of blocked narration.

In her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak discusses the way the subaltern woman as subject is already positioned, represented, spoken for or constructed

as absent or silent or not listened to in a variety of discourses. Her speech is already represented as non-speech. Black feminist and womanist critics have long argued that the interconnections of race, sex, and class, must be considered in any analysis of the lives and works of African-American women. These writers, by centering and voicing the black female subject, subvert the silencing of this most marginalized group in the "New World." While Hurston shows how blacks are not allowed to narrate their text, she also shows how black women are, in turn, subjected to the violent silencing of their voice by the African-American male. They therefore suffer the double indemnity of race and gender. Ironically, at Janie's trial, the very community that is effectively blocked from speech desires to destroy Janie verbally:

They were all against her, she could see. [. . .] She felt them pelting her with dirty thoughts. *They were there with their tongues cocked and loaded, the only real weapon left to weak folks. The only killing tool they are allowed to use in the presence of white folks.* (176; emphasis mine)

Sadly, the only "killing tool" that the black spectators have in the presence of white folks is trained, not on those who would suppress their voice, but on Janie; and the community's ready condemnation of Janie is telling. Although the black audience is composed of men and women,

they speak collectively with the voice of the black male. One wonders whether Janie would have received the same kind of support as Tea Cake had she been the victim instead of the accused. If African-Americans are silenced in word and deed by the white power structure, Hurston demonstrates how the African-American female is equally rendered mute and deprived of agency by the black male.

Mary Helen Washington, in her 1990 Foreword to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, writes that "the men are rarely shown in the progress of growth" and that "[t]heir talking is either a game or a method of exerting power" (xiii). Despite the silencing of African-Americans in this novel, Keith Byerman and others have noted the importance of verbal adeptness which gives one power in the black community. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in *The Signifying Monkey*, comments that *Their Eyes* draws upon the trope of signifying both as thematic matter and as rhetorical strategy.<sup>5</sup>

Janie's silencing is rendered acute during the signifying sessions (verbal games) which Joe enjoys on their porch with the rest of the community. Yet, when the men talk about wife beating as a natural course of action to control a woman, and make other disparaging remarks that reduce women to the level of chickens, the narrative

voice tells us that "Janie did what she had never done before, that is, thrust herself into the conversation" (70).

The fact that Janie had never presented her personal views in any community talk is telling. During her marriage to Jody, Janie is confronted with patriarchal authority at its worst. It begins in one of the earlier scenes when she and her husband have just moved into Eatonville and Janie is asked to make a speech as the wife of the newly elected mayor:

"And now we'll listen tuh uh few words uh encouragement from Mrs. Mayor Starks."

The burst of applause was cut short by Joe taking the floor himself.

"Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home." (40)

Janie is troubled by Starks' behavior, for although she does not necessarily care to make a speech, it was "the way Joe spoke without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another that took the bloom off of things" (41). Yet, this woman who "don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'" shows herself capable of making speeches and signifying at least as effectively as the men:

Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business. He told me how surprised He was 'bout y'all turning out so smart after Him makin' yuh different; and how surprised y'all is

goin' tuh be if you ever find out you don't know half as much 'bout us as you think you do. It's so easy to make yo'self out God Almighty when you ain't got nothin' tuh strain against but women and chickens. (70-71)

The power of her response leads Starks, threatened by Janie's wit and verbal skills, to insult her into silence by, paradoxically, implying her inferior intelligence: "You gettin' too moufy, Janie," Starks told her. "Go fetch me de checker-board and de checkers" (71).

Verbal and physical violence characterize Janie's marriage to Joe Starks. Although she periodically asserts her voice, for the most part she maintains her silence. Her silence begins when, after being brutally slapped for spoiling Jody's dinner, she finds that "she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about.[. . .] She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them" (68). This method of splitting her selves, of having an inside and an outside, otherwise called "masking," is a strategy which finds its roots in Vodun. Janie can be linked to the trickster figure, Legba.<sup>6</sup>

Janie retreats into silence to withstand Jody's constant assaults on her psyche: "The years took all the fight out of Janie's face. For a while she thought it was gone from her soul. No matter what Jody did, she said

nothing. She had learned how to talk some and to leave some" (72). Language has been used in this novel as a "weapon for the destruction and fragmentation of the self," Hazel Carby has noted (82-83). I suggest, however, that this splitting of selves through silence enables her to avoid complete fragmentation. She keeps her private self intact, under the tree, while allowing her public self to bow and scrape to the false god of sexism. Thanks to this survival strategy, Janie withstands Starks' barrage of abuse, which only worsens as he gets older and more insecure in his manhood.

The time comes one day when Janie makes a mistake in the store and Starks overreacts, as is his wont:

I god amighty! A woman stay round uh store till she get old as Methusalem and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don't stand dere rollin' yo' pop eyes at me wid yo' rump hangin' nearly to yo' knees. (74)

Only this time, instead of keeping silent, Janie retaliates:

You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'taint nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life. (75)

So powerful is her signification that Sam Watson gasps "Great God from Zion!" and "Y'all really playin' de dozens tuhnight" (75); and Lige Moss commiserates: "Ah ruther be shot with tacks than tuh hear dat 'bout mahself." Joe is

devastated for Janie has not only "robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible," but she has made him the laughing stock of the community: "When he paraded his possessions hereafter, they would not consider the two together. They'd look with envy at the things and pity the man that owned them" (75). So Janie has effectively destroyed Jody's spirit:

There was nothing to do in life anymore. Ambition was useless. And the cruel deceit of Janie! Making all that show of humbleness and scorning him all the time! .[. . .] So he struck Janie with all his might and drove her from the store.(76)

Nevertheless, the physical blow Janie receives cannot compare with the psychological knock-out punch Starks has been dealt. Not only is he publicly humiliated, but having defined himself by his possessions--including Janie--he feels betrayed by her apparent deception.

What Gates describes as signifying is considered by other critics as a most effective instance of conjure. For Houston A. Baker, Jr., in *Workings of the Spirit*, issues of narrative authority and gender are decisively resolved in the image of the conjure woman. Baker mentions one informant--from Mary A. Owen's 1881 account called *Among the Voodoos*--who asserted:



To be "strong in de haid"—that is, of great strength of will—is the most important characteristic of a "conjurer" or "voodoo." Never mind what you mix—blood, bones, feathers, grave-dust, herbs, saliva, or hair—it will be powerful or feeble in proportion to the dauntless spirit infused by you, the priest or priestess, at the time you represent the god.  
(qtd. in Baker 81)

Janie steps out of her silence and, in keeping with what Marjorie Pryse calls the Black woman's exercise of a transforming "magical" power (3), she reasserts herself. Robert Stepto and other critics have suggested that Janie's acquisition of voice is problematic, given the third-person narration of her defense during the murder trial. However, Alice Walker defends Janie's right to choose when to speak, arguing that "women did not have to speak when men thought they should, that they would choose when and where they wish to speak because while many women had found their own voices, they also knew when it was better not to use it" (qtd. in Washington xii). In defending Hurston's right to determine when to be silent, or not, Walker is, coincidentally, identifying an important element of Vodun.

Janie's act of conjure can also be compared to what Baker terms the "strikingly womanist power" of the practice of Vodun (81). As an example, he cites the following from Hurston's travel experiences:

"What is the truth?" Dr. Holly asked me, and knowing that I could not answer him he answered himself through a Voodoo ceremony in which the Mambo, that is the priestess, richly dressed, is asked this question ritualistically. She replies by throwing back her veil and revealing her sex organs. The ceremony means that this is the infinite, the ultimate truth. There is no mystery beyond the mysterious sources of life. (*Tell My Horse* 113)

Beyond the overtones of Vodun in Janie's flaunting of her female sexuality, Janie's period of silence, her ability to "lie," to wear the mask, can be read as a demonstration of Vodun survival tactics. Baker finds "the lie" to be a commonality in Haitian Vodun and conjure of the United States, defining acts of lying as "workings of the spirit, mythomania, or nonce fabrication" (81). He considers "the lie" to be "a performance designed to forward the cultural anima's always already impulse toward freedom or liberation" (76).

Faced with the reality of living with a domineering man, or of being on her own with its consequent hardships for a poor black woman, Janie retreats into self-imposed silence until she finds the moment to emerge and to challenge patriarchal authority. Beginning with the signifying session described earlier, Janie, now "strong in de haid," reinforces her newly claimed authority by confronting Starks on his death bed:

Ah knowed you wasn't gointuh lissen tuh me.[. . .]  
But Ah ain't goin' outa here and Ah ain't gointuh  
hush. Naw, you gointuh listen tuh me one time befo'  
you die. Have yo' way all yo' life, trample and mash  
down and then die ruther than tuh let yo'self heah  
'bout it. (82)

She expresses her disappointment in his silencing of her voice so that his would be the only voice heard, but Starks, who never spoke the language of love, was not about to do it now: "'All dis tearin' down talk!' Jody whispered with sweat globules forming all over his face and arms. 'Git outa heah!'" Their final conversation thus reenacts the drama of their marriage--Janie's search for communion and communication (truth) being met with hostility and a final attempt to silence her voice. Janie's response: "All dis bowin' down, all dis obedience under yo' voice--dat ain't whut Ah rushed off down de road tuh find out about you" (82). Once again, at this point in her marriage where the road is mentioned, Janie has reached another critical juncture in her spiritual journey.

The protagonist firmly establishes her agency by using the power of the word to initiate the process of healing herself. Jody, on the other hand, whom she had once thought "stood for change and chance" (28), is not prepared to change at this crucial point. Indeed, by

refusing to hear Janie, Jody denies the almost twenty years of verbal and physical abuse he has inflicted on his wife. Curiously, his portrayal of himself as victim gets a sympathetic response from male critics such as Darwin Turner, who takes exception to one of the "crudest scenes" of abuse of a dying man: "Never was his conduct so cruel as to deserve the vindictive attack which Janie unleashes while he is dying," argues Turner (*In a Minor Chord* 108). Male critics' inability or refusal to identify the real victim, Janie, underscores the very point of this final encounter, that is, the need to confront the truth and to begin the process of healing, which is at the root of Vodun.

When Janie ultimately steps out of silence to tell the truth, it signals the commencement of the process of reintegrating her two selves. Her strategy of silence--maintained to preserve her holistic personal and social identity--is followed by a powerful instance of conjuring meant to begin the healing process. Faced with the reality of her husband's impending death (he is dying of kidney failure), Janie's much celebrated act of voice is not designed to hurt him but to make him hear her and know how she felt for all those years. In other words, she tries to make him, for his own sake, as well as for hers,

confront and admit the truth--that in worshipping false gods ("things" over "people") he has suppressed her spirit, her right to live life to its fullest. She is, once again, at the metaphorical crossroads.

This is a story of a Vodun initiatory journey, a spiritual quest for self-knowledge which will be attained through intimacy with the loa/ancestor. Significantly, it is at the crossroads/gates that Hurston ushers in the act of narration. The gates become a point of entry, literally and figuratively, into her novel, which takes the form of a story within a story. The outer frame opens with the protagonist walking past members of Eatonville's community on the porch, "straight to her gate" (2). The community's questions, speculations, and judgments on Janie, mentioned earlier, are given voice "after her gate slammed behind her" (2). Their questions and speculations provide the context for the storytelling that will ensue when Pheoby walks "around the fence corner and [goes] in the intimate gate with her heaping plate of mulatto rice" (4). Pheoby's entrance through the back gate recaptures the opening of Vodun ceremonies when loas are addressed, summoned and, in Maya Deren's words, "served in inverted mirror terms."<sup>7</sup> The following is a representative invocation of the gods: "Papa Damballa, Mistress Erzulie,

with Miss Aida, I give you to eat with the left hand. It is with the left hand because you are the Invisibles" (qtd. in Deren 34).

Pheoby is clearly cast in the role of the neophyte about to embark on an initiatory journey, beginning with the ceremonial feeding of Janie who, I will show, embodies the form and spirit of the goddess Erzulie. Janie will go on to recount her story, which will be a transforming experience for Pheoby. Thus Janie becomes the spiritual mother/goddess, having completed, through storytelling, her own initiatory quest; that is, the return of the neophyte to heal the community.

The Vodun goddess, Erzulie, a major loa in the Vodun pantheon, represents three dimensions of the Black female's identity in the "New World": Erzulie Danto speaks for the poor, black-skinned woman and mother; Erzulie Freda, light skinned and richly ornamented, represents the image of the ideal for black women and men; and La Sirene takes the black woman into her watery chambers, only to return her with healing knowledge of medicinal plants and leadership qualities, as well as with longer, straighter hair and lighter skin. She is the "sea-aspect" of Erzulie, says Deren (120). I argue that Hurston uses the figure of Erzulie, in her three manifestations, as a subversive tool

to critique and signify upon the prevailing norms for the aesthetic ideal of black womanhood as determined and defined by classist and racist practices and beliefs in her society.

To begin with, this divine triad is a paradigm for (or it mirrors) the complexity of Black female identity in the Americas. Erzulie Freda is the goddess of love who rejects love. She is represented by the Catholic image of the Virgin Mary, but she is not "the passive queen of Heaven and mother of anybody," writes Hurston. Rather, "[s]he is the ideal of the love bed" (*Tell My Horse* 121). Hurston offers the following additional information about Erzulie Freda:

[S]he is the pagan goddess of love.[. . .] Erzulie has no children and her husband is all the men of Haiti. That is, anyone of them that she chooses for herself.[. . .] Erzulie Freida is a most jealous female spirit.[. . .] Erzulie is said to be a beautiful young woman of lush appearance. She is a mulatto [. . .]. She is represented as having firm, full breasts and other perfect female attributes. She is a rich young woman and [. . .] attires herself in beautiful, expensive raiment and sheds intoxicating odors from her person. To men she is gorgeous, gracious and beneficent. (121-22)

This goddess is alluded to several times in Hurston's *Their Eyes*. Furthermore, Hurston's protagonist shows an uncanny resemblance to Erzulie Freda in almost every respect, complete with Erzulie's contradictory nature.

Janie's love story, for example, is widely considered to be one of the greatest ever told, yet none of her marriages last. Like Erzulie Freda, the envy of the love bed, Janie's passionate love with Tea Cake provokes the envy of both men and women on the muck.

Tea Cake's slaps and caresses of Janie, and her responses, are a popular topic of discussion in the community:

It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. The way he petted and pampered her as if those two or three face slaps had nearly killed her made the women see visions and the helpless way she hung to him made men dream dreams. (140)

And just as "no woman could escape the vengeance of the enraged Erzulie" should she dare to rest on the bed of Erzulie's lover on the day reserved for the goddess (*Tell My Horse* 122), so too Janie's jealousy is aroused when a younger woman begins to flirt with Tea Cake. After chasing the woman, Janie fights with Tea Cake until "they were doped with their own fumes and emanations; till their clothes had been torn away; til he hurled her to the floor and held her there melting her resistance with the heat of his body" (132). Paradoxically, this couple's passionate relationship diverges from those of the goddess, whose love is never requited.



Physically, the resemblance between Erzulie Freda and Janie is just as striking. Janie, a beautiful octoroon, is the ideal of men with her long hair and fair complexion. They stare at her when she first comes to Eatonville, and although Jody's authority keeps them at bay, he eventually makes Janie cover her hair (to prevent the men from surreptitiously touching it when they thought no one was looking) (52). On Janie's return to Eatonville following Tea Cake's death, her physical appearance again arouses the interest of the men, and the envy of women, as it had done twenty odd years earlier:

The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. They, the men, were saving with the mind what they lost with the eye. (2)

Yet Janie, unlike Erzulie, does not revel in her physical attributes and the attention she attracts. Although she does use feminine guile to make Jody aware of her presence when she first sees him, and is not unaware of her attractiveness (the first thing she does after Jody's death is to look at herself in the mirror), she generally shows a nonchalance about her appearance. Indeed, it is Tea Cake who makes her look at herself and truly appreciate her attributes. This ambivalence in the

portrayal of Janie/Erzulie signals Hurston's desire to depict the complexity of black female identity, a non-monolithic one.

If Janie conforms physically and financially to the image of Vodun goddess Erzulie Freda, ideologically she resembles more closely Erzulie's alter ego, the black-skinned working-class mother, Erzulie Danto. Despite Janie's looks and social standing as the mayor's wife--which make her the object of men's lust and of women's envy, respectively--she resists the capitalist and racist ideology underlying her physical and socio-economic advantages. Neither interested in Killicks' sixty acres, nor in Jody's wealth and social position, Janie falls in love with a man who is the very antithesis of her previous spouses--a younger, penniless man. To "add insult to injury," she goes off with him to live on the muck where she easily integrates into the working class society.

Some recent critics have tended to focus on Hurston's alleged inferiority complex, which is supposed to explain the predominance in her fiction of mulatto heroines. For Deborah Plant, in *Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom*, this inferiority complex is demonstrated by the fact that in "none of her novels does she cast an African American with typically African features as the main

character" (149).<sup>8</sup> Plant suggests that Hurston, in her treatment of race, color, sex, and class, demonstrates her "desire to experience, if only vicariously, the phenomenon of beauty and privilege as she fantasized it" (155). Plant argues that Hurston's physical descriptions of characters "reflect the concern over race and color that typified the Harlem Renaissance" (149). Gloria Hull, along with other critics, also addresses the color consciousness of the Harlem Renaissance and its effect on other women writers of the period.<sup>9</sup> Hull emphasizes that "the matter of color has always had a heavier impact on black women [. . .]. Deep historical links between fair color and beauty, and fair color and class affiliation, are not easily broken" (qtd. in Plant 17).

A consideration of *Their Eyes* through the prism of a Vodun aesthetic proves these allegations of Hurston's inferiority complex to be unfounded. In addition to her depiction of Janie's ideological alignment with the working class, Hurston's depiction of Mrs. Turner is a telling indictment of those who are "color struck" and want to "class off." Mrs. Turner envies Janie's Caucasian looks:

So she didn't cling to Janie Woods the woman. She paid homage to Janie's Caucasian characteristics as such. And when she was with Janie she had a feeling

of transmutation, as if she herself had become whiter and with straighter hair and she hated Tea Cake first for his defilement of divinity and next for his telling mockery of her. (139)

Significantly, the notion of transmutation into a "whiter skin and "straighter hair" closely aligns with the role of the third goddess, mentioned earlier, in the complex triad that constitutes Erzulie. But if La Sirène brings one out of the water physically transformed into the ideal of feminine beauty, Hurston shows how the bigoted Mrs. Turner will never be transmuted. Her portrayal of this prejudiced woman of mixed blood thus adds to her overall critique of the many and varied discourses, both within and without the African American community, that seek to oppress black folk in general, and black women in particular.

Janie is ideologically associated with the working class goddess, Erzulie Danto, particularly on the muck where she is allowed to participate fully in all social activities and manual labor generally associated with the poor blacks. Mrs. Turner, on the other hand, is clearly caricatured for her self-hatred, a characteristic that Frantz Fanon and others have shown derives from internalized racism. Furthermore, through Hurston's caricaturing of the physiques of Mrs. Turner and her

brother, the author is clearly subverting the idea of alleged superiority, on any level, of people of mixed races.

Hurston's novel paved the way for black women novelists' depiction of the wholesomeness of African-American folk life. In deliberately abjuring any affiliation to the social realist novels of the era, and in espousing politically conservative views, Hurston earned the condemnation of many writers of her day. Yet, thanks to the brilliance of Alice Walker, one of Hurston's literary daughters, and of Robert Hemenway's superb biography, this incredibly gifted novelist and folklorist has emerged from veritable obscurity to become a household name today. Walker recognized Hurston's ability to weave wonderful stories that depict the "racial health" of the black folk community--" a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature" ("Foreword" Hemenway xii-xiii)--often obscures the underlying subversive nature of her novel *Their Eyes*. Abounding in Vodun images and written out of a Vodun aesthetic, her novel represents the ultimate trickster tale, for it subverts while appearing to conform.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "Panthelism" is defined in *The American Heritage Dictionary* as both the "doctrine identifying the Deity with the various forces and workings of nature" and "belief in and worship of all gods."

<sup>2</sup> John Lowe, throughout his article "Seeing Beyond Seeing: Zora Neale Hurston's Religion(s)," pulls together all the religious strands in Hurston's life to show the syncretic nature of her religious system.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Murphy, in *Working the Spirit*, describes how the tree is symbolically represented in Vodun ceremonies by the center post, or *poteau mitan*, which supports the roof of the vodun dance area or *peristil*. The center post "acts as a vertical link between sky, earth, and underworld, and thus the worlds of *lwa* and human beings. It is a great tree with its branches above and its roots in Guinen (Guinee), Africa. It draws up the spirits from their homes in Africa, which is seen to lie on the 'other side' of this world, among the waters below the earth.[. . .] As the spatial representation of access to Guinen, all ceremonial activities take place in the shadow of this great tree" (28).

<sup>4</sup> Erzulie will be discussed in greater detail in a later section of this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in *The Signifying Monkey*, links signification with the pattern of play and gaming in the novel. See the chapter "Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text," (170-216).

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Levine provides an excellent discussion of the trickster tradition in African American culture and charts the changes that were taking place in it in the early twentieth century. Femi Euba also provides a very illuminating study of the trickster figure Esu, also known as Legba, a shortened form of Elegbara.

<sup>7</sup> Deren describes the metaphysical world of the Invisibles as a "world within a cosmic mirror, peopled by the immortal reflections of all those who had ever confronted it" (34).

<sup>8</sup> Plant also suggests that Hurston's predilection for the mulatto might be traced to her adoration for her father, a man with gray-green eyes, light skin and a strong build, whom she resembled. The writer argues that although Hurston resented and resisted her father's ideal of beauty and femininity, she internalized it and that the mulatto image of the coveted, ideal woman subtly manifests itself throughout her work (160).

<sup>9</sup> Hull states that "[c]olor defined the Harlem Renaissance. Philosophically and practically, it was a racial movement whose overriding preoccupation can be seen in all of its aspects and manifestations--the name of the era (where Harlem is synonymous with Black), its debates and manifestos (Locke's "The New Negro" and Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain"), book titles (Georgia Johnson's *Bronze*), Cullen's *Color*, *The Ballad of the Brown Girl*, and *Copper Sun*), artistic illustrations (the African motifs of Aaron Douglas and Gwendolyn Bennett), and so on. Indeed, during the 1920s, Alice Dunbar, Angelina Grimke, and Georgia Douglas Johnson were participating in a literary movement that was, by self-definition, race oriented. How they were affected by this general reality emerged from their own specific realities as black women. Racial attitudes of the larger society, Harlem Renaissance dictates, and personal experience all combined to determine the handling of color in their writings" (qtd. in Plant 149).

## CHAPTER THREE

### SIMONE SCHWARZ-BART'S THEATRE OF THE MARVELOUS

Simone Schwarz-Bart has experienced a life of travel and displacements bringing her from her native Guadeloupe to Europe, then to Africa and back to Guadeloupe, where she is living today. In *Pluie et Vent Sur Télumée Miracle*, set in early twentieth-century Guadeloupe, the author centers and gives voice to an African-Caribbean woman, the last in a matriarchy of three generations of resilient mothers and daughters. Vodun, which engages all aspects of existence--good and evil, human, animal and vegetal, the visible and the invisible--permeates this novel on several levels. On the negative side, it informs the inhabitants' overwhelming sense of alienation resulting in psychic disruptions comparable to zombification. Conversely, Vodun is the positive force that guides and sustains the Lougandor women to triumph psychologically over their almost unbelievably difficult existence in the French colony--recalling, thereby the liberating force that propelled the Haitian slaves to victory over their more powerful French adversaries.

René Depestre has defined zombification as follows:

In the Haitian context, a myth has been invented that tells of alienation, the last ditch effort of those who are truly oppressed, from whom everything has been taken, even *self-awareness*, even the awareness of your body, or the feel or value of your body. Such a



mutilation of being, that terrible zombification began with slavery. (qtd. in Dayan, "France Reads Haiti" 147)

This graphic depiction of the soul torn asunder by the twin evils of colonialism and slavery represents a reality which, as West Indian writers Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Edward Kamau Braithwaite and Edouard Glissant have noted, is evidenced across the Caribbean at large. Yet Schwarz-Bart opposes the zombification to which many of the inhabitants succumb, with the unbelievably positive mindset of the Lougandor women. In her depiction of the triumphant lives of the Lougandor women, the author subverts the negativity often associated with poor women of African descent.

For a folk community resistant to, yet inexorably affected by cultural assimilation, traces of African and Native-American beliefs and practices in the form of ancestor veneration, metamorphosis, rootworking and herbal medicine, are commonplace occurrences. The socio-economic and political oppression of the masses that writers such as Michel Laguerre identify as the cause of the proliferation of Vodun practices in Haiti--and which, they argue, provide Haitians with coping skills--also explain Schwarz-Bart's depiction of these folk practices in her novel. In addition, the worldview of these communities is conveyed through a particularly oral style of language.

Storytelling, songs, proverbs, drum and dance--all important features of this novel--bear witness to the survival of a cosmology that defines the relationship between man and his environment and nature. *Pluie et Vent* tries to make a new language out of the givens of French and the remnants of African culture perpetuated and transformed in the islands. Language, states Maryse Condé in "Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer," is "the cord which links the West Indian to his land, to his past, to his history. The cord which links the West Indian to the West Indian" (127). Schwarz-Bart uses orality, a vital creative force which resonates throughout her work, not only to create or reconstruct a literary and cultural continuity between the oral and written traditions, but also to reestablish a historical and cultural continuity with the Motherland, Africa. As do the other authors in this study, Schwarz-Bart reclaims the once rejected and denigrated aspects of Vodun culture as integral parts of African descendants' existence and reality.

### **Spatio-Temporal Dimensions of Schwarz-Bart's Marvelous Realism**

Schwarz-Bart relates the negative aspects of Guadeloupe's marvelous reality to a sense of alienation in time and space. The problem for the West Indian today, it

is argued, lies in the lack of an ancestral connection to the island space. This renders difficult the recovery of one's identity. The absence of an essence or essential meaning, which Glissant sees as the main characteristic of the Caribbean, is tied to a lack of an indigenous base, of a cultured hinterland, and the creation of a society built on repopulation.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, traces of the original population remain. Schwarz-Bart alludes to this ancient civilization that inhabited the "New World" when the narrator/protagonist, Télumée, on going down to the river to do the laundry, enters an unfamiliar section of the forest and muses: "L'endroit me mystifiait un peu, comme si, en un temps révolu et lointain, l'avaient habité des hommes capables de se réjouir des rivières, des arbres" (136).<sup>2</sup> This sense of a mysterious past involving a symbiotic relationship between man and nature is suggestive of the holistic worldview espoused by both the indigenous peoples of the Americas, as well as their "New World" African replacements.

Télumée's sensation of a missing link in Guadeloupe's history also reflects the ambivalent relationship between displaced Africans and their adopted homeland. The narrator's personal history begins when her mother, Victoire, leaves the ten year old in the care of her grandmother, Toussine, and flees the village of

L'Abandonnée with her lover, Haut Colbi, on the advice of a sorcerer, in the hope of escaping a possible Oedipal situation. L'Abandonnée, a village founded by Minerve as a place of refuge after the abolition of slavery, recalls the famous maroon settlements that were emblematic of slave resistance. Yet the inhabitants could not fully escape the memory of slavery, as Télumée narrates: "Certains jours, une angoisse s'emparait de tout le monde, et les gens se sentaient là comme des voyageurs perdus en terre inconnue" (12-13).<sup>3</sup> In addition to the anguish and sense of alienation which the inhabitants experience in the restricted and restricting world of Schwarz-Bart's Guadeloupe, zombification manifests itself in several other forms: madness, fear, fatalism, and depression. Struck by the curse of its slave history, which remains a vivid almost tangible memory, this French colony is menaced by "la folie antillaise" (West Indian madness), a state of disconnection from self and from the environment which threatens and carries away its inhabitants:

Lorsque, durant les longs jours bleus et chauds, la folie antillaise se met à tournoyer dans l'air au-dessus des bourgs, des mornes et des plateaux, une angoisse s'empare des hommes à l'idée de la fatalité qui plane au-dessus d'eux, s'appêtant à fondre sur l'un ou l'autre, à la manière d'un oiseau de proie, sans qu'il puisse offrir la moindre résistance. (41)<sup>4</sup>

During those moments, a sense of fatalism overwhelms the inhabitants who, no longer proud masters of their destiny,

have lost confidence in themselves and in the future. The men in particular appear to be scripted for personal disaster.

Even those who are resistant at first to colonialism, such as Élie and Amboise, fight a losing battle--the former loses his "soul," the latter his life. Élie, initially full of the optimism and the rebellion of youth, vows to avoid the curse of the cane fields and takes a job as sawyer with Amboise in the mountain forests--the historical and symbolical domain of independence from colonial influence. He dares to dream of a better life for himself and his girlfriend, Télumée, yet he deliberately injects a sense of fatalism into their relationship--as evidenced in the pessimistic tone of the "common law" marriage proposal he addresses to Télumée's grandmother:

[J]e ne sais pas si le jour viendra jamais où je lui encerclerai le doigt d'or. Je n'en sais rien [...]. Demain notre eau peut devenir vinaigre ou vin doux, mais si c'est vinaigre, n'allez pas me maudire, [...] car dites-le-moi, n'est-ce pas un spectacle courant, ici à Fond-Zombi, que la métamorphose d'un homme en diable? (120)<sup>5</sup>

Significantly, the name of the village, "Fond-Zombi"

("zombie base"), is indicative of the state of zombification to which Élie alludes in this passage.

Indeed, Élie's fear that he will turn into the incarnation of evil becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for he eventually loses his soul to the colonial and capitalist

machinery. The beginning of his demise is triggered by drought and widespread poverty which put an end to the demand for his work. He stops going to the mountain forest and admits to Télumée that life is moving beyond his control:

Ah, ah, grogna-t-il faiblement, *ce que j'ai toujours craint est en train d'arriver*, nous n'habitons plus la terre ferme, Télumée, nous sommes dans la haute mer et les courants et ce que je me demande, c'est si je vais me noyer comme ça, du premier coup. (145; italics mine)<sup>6</sup>

It is no coincidence that Élie moves away from the forest as he succumbs to his fear of zombification. In this novel, the strongest symbolism is that of the woman (mother) and of the island (earth) in their beauty, their fertility and their duration as opposed to the male, who is depicted as uncertain, a passing stranger. Positive and negative associations with the land and with nature in general reflect the extent of the inhabitants' ability to withstand the evils of their colonial space. Élie distances himself from the life-giving forces of the tree (forest) as he successively succumbs to alcoholism, and resorts to spousal abuse, all the while blaming his actions on a seemingly unjust fate which oppresses his race. Élie becomes permanently detached from the land. His spiritual and psychological demise culminates in perpetual

vagabondage, thereby earning him the title "Poursuivi définitif" ("Hunted One") from the villagers.

Similar instances of zombification characterized by flight from personal responsibility plague other male figures such as Germain, a well-known crayfish thief who, from the day he is publicly cursed for stealing from one man's pot, proclaims his inability to control his destiny. Accordingly, he kills Télumée's father and his benefactor, Angebert, and then states: "[J]'ai piqué Angebert et vous pouvez me tuer, allez-y, vous avez raison . . . mais je jure que c'est pas ma faute, non, pas ma faute . . ."

(40).<sup>7</sup> This fatalistic approach to life, although popularly thought to be the totality of Vodun, finds a striking parallel in perceptions of the Middle Ages. Jean Delumeau, in *La Peur en Occident*, notes that the Christian populations in medieval Europe, still fiercely attached to their "pagan" traditions, were haunted by morbid fantasies of mysterious, supernatural beings. In this rural environment, notes Delumeau, a sort of permanent fear of the sea, stars, portents, and wolves co-existed with other somewhat cyclical fears and anxieties related to diseases and famines. This association of fear and superstition with ignorance and poverty echoes James Haskins' description, in *Voodoo and Hoodoo*, of the Haitian countryside where life is viewed as a constant battle with

hostile forces, and man retains control over evil forces by employing opposite and counteractive forces (36, 38). The acceptance of evil spirits and evildoers as part of the universe, however, does not constitute the essential aspect of Vodun. Fear of evil is real, but it is counteracted by empowering acts and thoughts that serve to maintain emotional and spiritual balance.

Consequently, while the marvelous space of Guadeloupe may be negatively defined, it is also positively constructed in this novel. In other words, the "evil" forces that threaten the well-being of the inhabitants are offset by positive elements that can uplift their spirits. Against the backdrop of fatalism and powerlessness, the heroine presents her female ancestors in chronological fashion, detailing the triumphant lives of her great-grandmother Minerve, who holds "une foi inébranlable en la vie" (Schwarz-Bart 13) ("an unshakable faith in life" (Bray 5); and Minerve's daughter, Toussine, renamed "Reine Sans Nom" ("Queen Without a Name") by the villagers for her courage and enduring spirit. Then comes Victoire, Toussine's daughter, who undaunted by her past trials, chooses love and leaves the island. Finally, Télumée, later renamed "Télumée Miracle," begins her own story when Toussine takes her to Fond-Zombi where, pure and innocent, Télumée will evolve in harmony with her environment.



Schwarz-Bart shows that the source of the Lougandor women's strength is the fundamentally Vodun philosophy by which they live, a strong sense of connection with the natural world around them and particularly other living beings. This connection--their awareness of and valuing of life forces--is highlighted by Schwarz-Bart's use of natural elements to symbolize their characters. Karen Smyley Wallace observes that Minerve is associated with light; Toussine, with the notion of roots from the earth; Victoire, with the wind (in privileging her personal happiness); and Télumée with the earth and fecundity, dawn, bark and tree, or even the island itself (as she contemplates its physical nature) (429). The natural images associated with the Lougandor women illustrate their correspondences to the natural forces around them and, thus, their harmony with the vegetal world.

As the inheritor of the female line of strength, Télumée's rootedness in her heritage and in life is given special emphasis through the tree imagery. The tree is an important symbol in Vodun. Inhabited by spirits, it constitutes the axis between the visible and invisible worlds, represented symbolically by the poteau-mitan, the center pole of the Vodun tent.<sup>8</sup> Télumée's figurative association with the tree is therefore suggestive of her spiritual strength and durability, and her link with the

world of the ancestors. The types of trees evoked in connection with Télumée also reveal additional information about the immaterial aspects of the protagonist, as Beverly Ormerod observes in *An Introduction to the French Caribbean Novel*:

The filao or casuarina [. . .] is a wind-resistant evergreen symbolic of faithfulness. As a timber often used in carpentry, it is appropriate to Telumee's life which is passing into Elie's hands. The flame tree (flamboyant, or poinciana, in the French text)[. . .] was earlier used as the emblem of Telumee's happy childhood friendship with Elie (pp. 44, 53) and also, by both Elie and her grandmother, as a term of endearment for Telumee herself (pp. 45, 67)[. . .]. The third tree[. . .] the supple, evergreen bamboo, familiar in oriental art as a graceful symbol of long and happy life, was earlier associated with the loving support that Telumee had brought to her solitary and ageing grandmother, who "had found a little bamboo stick to serve as a prop to her old bones" (p. 41)[. . .]. The bamboo tree, too, will appear once more in the novel, linked with the dominant motif of the tree that withstands the elements, to express the idea of human growth towards maturity: 'There is a time for carrying a child, a time for bringing it forth, a time for watching it grow and become like a bamboo in the wind.' (163)

All the life-affirming aspects of human nature-- faithfulness, happiness, love, grace, endurance, wisdom-- are inscribed in these various associations with the tree. As a dominant motif in this novel, it reveals the author's use of a Vodun aesthetic which emphasizes the essential connection between man and nature, with the persistent optimism espoused by the Lougandor women.

These women's empowering philosophy is also shown by their connection with the marvelous and even the supernatural. The sorceress, Man Cia, serves as an excellent example of the phenomenon of metamorphosis so widespread in West Indian tales and in the popular imagination, as Télumée narrates:

[J]'étais toujours intéressé lorsque les hommes se mettaient à parler d'esprits, de sortilèges, du compère qu'on avait vu courir en chien, la semaine passée, et de la vieille man Cia qui toutes les nuits planait au-dessus des mornes, des vallons et des cases de Fond-Zombi, insatisfaite de son enveloppe humaine. [. . .] Un jour, le père Abel raconta comment man Cia lui avait fait cette cicatrice au bras, lui avait lancé ce coup de griffe de négresse volante. (54-55)<sup>9</sup>

In Vodun tradition, sickness and other forms of misfortune are generally interpreted in supernatural terms. Just as father Abel attributes the scratch on his arm to the machinations of the sorceress, Man Cia, the latter will, in her turn, attribute Élie's psychic disintegration to evildoing, as Toussine recounts:

[E]lle m'a dit qu'un mauvais esprit avait été envoyé contre ta case, pour y mettre désolation. Pour commencer, l'esprit est entré dans le corps d'Élie et c'est pourquoi les sangs de cet homme se combattent et le démontent pièce à pièce. Man Cia te fait dire qu'elle ne dort pas dans ses bois et comme Élie s'est démonté pièce à pièce, ainsi elle le remontera. La première chose, c'est de désenchanter la case où tu te trouves, pour que l'esprit n'ait aucune prise sur toi. Je vais m'y mettre dès demain à fumer des herbes qu'elle m'a données, afin que cet esprit s'en retourne dare-dare chez son maître. Tu le sais Télumée, le mal est très puissant sur terre. (157)<sup>10</sup>

However, when Élie learns that Toussine is performing Vodun rituals to undo the spell that has been cast on him, he reacts violently:

Élie arriva écumant de rage et renvoyant du pied les coques fumantes, il hurla qu'il ne voulait voir autour de sa maison aucune sorcière; dès à présent, des pièges seraient tendus par toute la savane et malheur à qui la piétinerait. (158)<sup>11</sup>

This passage encapsulates the Vodun belief that good and evil forces proliferate throughout the universe, and that instead of attempting to eradicate the latter, a futile endeavor at best, evil spells can be reversed by performing certain purifying rituals and using specially prepared herbs. But success is never guaranteed, and especially not without the consent of the victim, as is evidenced in Élie's violent rejection of all efforts to free him from the conjuring spell. In other words, the desire to overcome evil, and to grow spiritually, must come from within.

Unlike the Lougandor women whose empowerment lies in their recognition of the cosmos as a site of continual battle between good and evil forces, thus exemplifying the dualistic and practical philosophy of Vodun, Élie succumbs to the forces of evil because he will neither acknowledge his problem, nor accept help from the community. Zombification is the ultimate state of alienation, that is, from self and from the community.

Noteworthy, also, is the lack of ironic distancing from these folk beliefs. The narrator/protagonist presents her world in a matter-of-fact manner without condescension or skepticism. The discussion of Man Cia's powers, for example, inspires fear and respect, but the reality of her powers are never in doubt. Indeed, her special abilities facilitate Toussine's communication with her dead husband, Jérémie. Intimately acquainted with Man Cia's powers, Toussine is able to distinguish her magic from the evildoing of which she is suspected. This ability to use magical powers for good or evil is consistent with the belief in Vodun priests/priestesses' having both good and evil forces at their disposal. Although Man Cia only uses her powers for good, Toussine does not rule out her ability to harm: "En vérité, man Cia est une femme de bien mais il ne faut pas lui chauffer les oreilles" (56).<sup>12</sup>

Significantly, when Télumée later learns from Man Cia the healing arts of herbal medicine, she will steadfastly refuse to acquire the other knowledge--that of metamorphosis:

Je sus délivrer bêtes et gens, lever les  
envoutements, renvoyer tous leurs maléfices à ceux-  
là mêmes qui les avaient largués. Cependant, chaque  
fois qu'elle était sur le point de me dévoiler le  
secret des métamorphoses, quelque chose me retenait,  
m'empêchait de troquer ma forme de femme à deux  
seins contre celle de bête ou de socouyant volant.  
(190)<sup>13</sup>

It can be argued that Télumée's decision not to learn the ultimate magical power betrays the author's reticence in completely embracing these folk beliefs. Perhaps, though, Télumée's refusal of this knowledge can be read as reflecting the author's own experience of the culturally alienating influence of Western education. France's educational policy of assimilation on its colonized peoples resulted, as Franz Fanon and others, have remarked, in an acute state of alienation from self. Thus, while Schwarz-Bart, through her protagonist, bears witness to the reality of West Indian life without significant ironic distancing, she imposes limits on the degree of identification with the magical beliefs and practices of the folk. Télumée is saddened by the loss of human company when Man Cia transforms herself permanently into the form of a black dog, but she does not condemn the old woman and learns quickly to accept Man Cia's new form.

This novel celebrates life in all of its manifestations: human, animal, and vegetal; visible and invisible. Nevertheless, in repeatedly affirming the value and dignity of human life, as well as her womanhood, the protagonist bears witness to the Vodun belief in the sanctity of the human body and in particular the female body as the source of life; it is the antithesis of zombification which is characterized by, among other

things, a loss of awareness of the value of one's body. This devaluation of the body is related to the devaluation of one's physical space. J. Michael Dash's comment, in *The Other America*, that "Haiti would emerge time and time again as that privileged space lost to modernity where the modernist sensibility could retrieve a sense of organic wholeness and purity" (39), can be applied to this novel. In *Pluie et Vent*, Schwarz-Bart reveals that the Lougandor women fashion for themselves such a "privileged space" in Guadeloupe. At the conclusion of the novel, in Télumée's twilight years, she observes: "Soleil levé, soleil couché, les journées glissent et le sable que soulève la brise enlisera ma barque, mais je mourrai là, comme je suis, debout, dans mon petit jardin, quelle joie!" (249).<sup>14</sup> The garden figuratively represents the island as a positive space and the author demonstrates how, in the "New World" setting of colonial Guadeloupe, transplanted Africans are obliged to forge new alliances with this space as a counter to their alienation from their ancestral past. Schwarz-Bart identifies the source of evil in Guadeloupe as colonialism and slavery, but she also shows that a negative approach to life, notwithstanding the existing socio-economic and political climate, severely impedes the well-being of the inhabitants. To Élie's question of why they are haunted, she opposes Amboise's wise response: "Ami,

rien ne poursuit le nègre que son propre coeur" (147).<sup>15</sup> But Élie's "heart" is not open to receiving the call to serve the gods by embracing life on the island space. A positive mental approach will enable one to overcome the internal battle for one's spirit, a battle which is constant and real. This echoes the narrator's declaration at the onset: "Le pays dépend bien souvent du coeur de l'homme: il est minuscule si le coeur est petit, et immense si le coeur est grand" (11).<sup>16</sup> In other words, one's relationship with one's country and physical environment, negative or positive, relates to one's ability to generously embrace all of creation. The Lougandor women demonstrate a seemingly greater capacity to connect with their environment than do the men. This is not to say that they do not possess basic human weaknesses. However, although they at times lapse into alcoholism and depression as escape routes from their emotional pain, their flights from reality, when they are reduced to a zombified state, are never permanent.

These women do not lose their way as a consequence of some tragic character flaw; rather, their struggles are part of the spiritual journey: Toussine naturally grieves deeply for three years following the agonizing burning death of her daughter, Méranée; Victoire understandably becomes an alcoholic for six months when she is jilted by



her lover, Hubert; equally understandable is Télumée's depression and alcoholism following Élie's repudiation, Amboise's violent death, and her stint in the dehumanizing cane fields. Alcoholism, writes Ormerod, "becomes the symptom of inconsolable despondency and of a desire to annihilate the reality of a seemingly hopeless situation" (125). Yet, as Schwarz-Bart demonstrates, these women repeatedly rise above their pain to accept the challenges in their lives. At the beginning of the novel Télumée affirms her personal happiness and her preference for her island as birthplace:

Si on m'en donnait le pouvoir, c'est ici même, en Guadeloupe, que je choisirais de naître, souffrir et mourir. Pourtant, il n'y a guère, mes ancêtres furent esclaves en cette île à volcans, à cyclones et à moustiques, à mauvaise mentalité. (11)<sup>17</sup>

Through her protagonist's clear and resounding reclamation of space, the author shows that the inhabitants are not condemned to the curse that haunts them. In effect, the country of the marvelous is everywhere, but Schwarz-Bart demonstrates that it is most of all a state of mind. Those who desire to attain this deeper experience of their country must liberate images from their conventional associations and embrace life in their island space. While the men often succumb to the madness of the environment, the women are the griots, the culture bearers who restore the forgotten memory and sustain the surviving links

between the mother country, *Guinen*, and Guadeloupe. In so doing, they establish the continuity between time and space.

Bonnie Barthold, in *Black Time*, mentions the focus on the sense of madness and chaos of time in black fiction. Literature is one of the many modes through which mankind has attempted to re-establish some sense of order in a universe where irrational behavior and passions are rife. However, long before societies evolved their own body of written literatures, symbolic ceremonials and sacred myths were used as instruments of order and as powerful instances of the re-enactment of past events in a present context. Since slavery deprived the West Indian of his/her original myth, the earliest memory begins with slavery. From that time of rupture with the past, with *Guinen*, West Indian society, formed in the womb of the slave ship, unceasingly attempts to define its origin. I argue that Vodun, with its focus on myth and ritual, with its attention to the gods of Africa, and those indigenous to the local environment, provides the initiate with that sense of continuity with the past.

Schwarz-Bart's novel takes the form of an initiation quest in which the neophyte will learn to understand the true meaning of her life within the brutal colonial system. Télumée, experiencing that sense of a missing link with the

past, embarks on a quest for the essential in life: "[P]lus j'en apprenais, plus il me semblait que l'essentiel échappait à mon attention" (53).<sup>18</sup> In this study of the black female's struggle for wholeness, the root of the problem lies in the colonial encounter and the consequent devastation wrought on the lives of black folk--whether one's happiness is defined in terms of racial self-awareness or of spiritual well-being. Raised in a rural environment under the loving ministrations of her grandmother and a supportive community, Télumée does not suffer from W.E.B. Du Bois' much-cited "double consciousness." Still, this novel poses a question about how to face the trials of black female existence and remain spiritually and psychologically whole. The object of Télumée's quest becomes finding the meaning of her *raison d'être* within the vicious stranglehold of socio-economic reality in this Caribbean colony. Although the origin of the problems which assail this Guadeloupean community is not often explicitly evoked, it makes itself felt throughout the novel. Slavery is at the root of the difficulty in thinking of oneself within a coherent historical context, in situating oneself in the chain of events which, in time, constitute history. As in all Vodun initiation ceremonies, the presence of an ancestor figure is crucial in these texts.

Mythical figures like Toussine and Man Cia are notably positioned between the visible and invisible worlds, thereby collapsing distinctions between past, the time of the ancestors, and the present. Schwarz-Bart opposes the linear "progressive" conception of time by showing that human nature, and often living conditions over the centuries, never change. The theme of slavery is therefore a major issue in the search for truth. Thus, in a symbolic encounter with the past (Man Cia) and the present (Télumée), the latter is given a concrete lesson on slavery, in response to her query as to what a slave and a master look like:

Si tu veux voir un esclave, dit-elle froidement, tu n'as qu'à descendre au marché de la Pointe et regarder les volailles ficelées dans les cages, avec leurs yeux d'épouvante. Et si tu veux savoir à quoi ressemble un maître, tu n'as qu'à aller à Galba, à l'habitation Belle Feuille, chez les Desaragne. Ce ne sont que leurs descendants, mais tu pourras te faire une idée. (60)<sup>19</sup>

Man Cia operates here as the African griot who passes on the story so that Télumée can understand the present from knowing the past. The "folie antillaise" and other forms of zombification find their origins in this original evil. Man Cia, through storytelling, effaces the time of slavery and the present time of colonial rule for Télumée, who admits that

[P]our la première fois de ma vie, je sentais que l'esclavage n'était pas un pays étranger, une région

lointaine d'où venaient certaines personnes très  
anciennes, comme il en existait encore deux ou trois,  
à Fond-Zombi. (62)<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, attitudes and living conditions remain the same--  
racist and oppressive, in post-emancipation Guadeloupe.  
Man Cia, Toussine's spiritual Other, complements the  
latter's role in raising Télumée's level of social,  
historical, and cultural consciousness. Toussine also  
links the past to the present through rituals and dreams,  
crucial elements in Vodun. Consequently, when Toussine  
accidentally drops some sauce on the ground, Man Cia teases  
her:

"Ah," dit man Cia, "les morts se servent en  
premier, maintenant?"

"Tu le sais," répondit grand-mère en souriant,  
"Jérémie a toujours eu un faible pour la daube de  
cochon planche."

"Et comment va-t-il?" s'enquit gravement man Cia.

"Il ne m'a pas oublié," dit grand-mère heureuse,  
"il vient me voir toutes les nuits, sans faute. Il  
n'a pas changé, il est pareil que de son vivant. . ."

"Mais il va bien?" reprit son ami.

"Il va très bien," assura gravement grand-mère.  
(59-60)<sup>21</sup>

Noteworthy is the almost banal depiction of this  
conversation of communication with the dead. And with such  
familiarity between the visible and invisible worlds, death  
becomes a welcome occasion to meet loved ones. Toussine  
claims to be constantly visited by her dead husband,  
Jérémie, and she promises similar companionship and  
protection for Télumée after her own death:

Ce n'est pas ma mort qui me réjouit tant, dit elle, mais ce qui la suivra . . . le temps où nous ne nous quitterons plus, mon petit verre en crystal . . . peux-tu imaginer notre vie, moi te suivant partout, invisible, sans que les gens s'en doutent jamais qu'ils ont affaire à deux femmes et non pas à une seule? (174)<sup>22</sup>

Toussine reverses the normally (from a Western perspective) troubling idea of being "haunted" by a spirit. In this marvelous holistic world Télumée later admits, matter-of-factly, to the reality of her grandmother's continuing presence in her life:

Depuis mon arrivée au morne la Folie, j'étais soutenue par la présence de Reine Sans Nom qui appuyait de moitié chacune de mes peines de sorte que j'étais véritablement, grâce à elle, une négresse tambour à deux coeurs. C'était du moins ce que je croyais, jusqu'à ce que man Cia se transforme en chien et disparaisse. Je sus alors que la protection des morts ne remplace pas la voix des vivants. (195)<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, Télumée is reassured by the invisible presence of her ancestor, and--as previously mentioned--less chagrined at losing her friend, Man Cia, than at the loss of physical, human companionship.

Although this is a cyclical novel--each woman from the Lougandor family replacing her ancestor and making the same initiation journey--it is important to note that these characters are distinct individuals and not successive reincarnations of a unique ancestor: Toussine does not resemble her mother, Minerve, and Télumée is a quite different personality from Toussine and Victoire. The

story is also related in a linear fashion--from the time of the ancestor Minerve up to that of Télumée, the last of the dynasty--but what is striking in this novel is the repetition of events and actions: the women find suitable companions after disastrous relationships; Toussine and Jérémie's period of conjugal bliss before disaster strikes repeats itself in Télumée and Élie's experience; both Toussine and Télumée miraculously triumph over their troubles. But Toussine is the ancestor figure, the mythical being on whom Télumée models herself, for the former possesses the essential quality, faith in life, that each Lougandor woman will try to capture and relive in her own way. Significantly, their suffering and ultimate triumphs are woven into the fabric of communal life, and are closely linked to their cultural traditions.

Tradition in African--and by extension neo-African societies--is above all the collective experience of the community, a means of communication between the dead and the living, a sort of tacit agreement between the past and the present. A continuous repetition of cultural and spiritual beliefs--through rituals and the consolidation of myths--provide these communities with a sense of relative continuity and security. The gods may have changed to some degree, and the manner of venerating them may vary from region to region, but belief in the ancestors, the time of

the myth, "sacred, eternal, and transcendent" is the time vodouists constantly relive in their ceremonies. Outside of these "pockets of resistance," the Western linear (progressive) concept of time has contributed to New World Africans' alienation from their history and their ancestors. They become slaves to the hegemony of a Western, masculinist order that attempts to regulate all things and beings. For example, while working at the Desaragnes', Télumée notes the precision in their lives: "Chaque chose avait une place, une heure, une raison d'être bien précise, rien n'était laissé au hasard" (91).<sup>24</sup> No room is allowed for spontaneous behavior or events in this worldview which Télumée ultimately rejects on returning to the village and to its different temporal order.

In the agrarian society of Fond-Zombi, the economic well-being of the community is dependent on the cyclical seasons. The sense of malaise, mentioned earlier, increases at the end of crop time: "Arriva la fin de la récolte, le chômage, le temps de la débrouillardise. Les économies des nègres avaient encore fondu plus vite cette année-là" (38).<sup>25</sup> It is during this period of want that Germain "tournait à travers L'Abandonnée comme un fauve en cage" (38).<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Élie's depression is triggered by the alternating periods of flooding and drought which reduce the demand for new houses, and Élie's carpentry



skills. It is noteworthy that Élie's inability to understand the cyclical sense of time contributes to his demise whereas Toussine's husband, Jérémie, flourishes as he lives in tandem with nature:

Il continuait à pêcher en solitaire, ne ramenant jamais sur la plage une barque vide, aussi ingrate que fût la mer. Selon les médisants, il usait de sorcellerie en se faisant seconder par un esprit que pêchait à sa place, les jours où la mer était dépeuplée. Mais à la vérité, le seul secret de l'homme était son énorme patience. Lorsque les poissons ne mordaient ni à droite, ni à gauche, Jérémie descendait sous l'eau pour plonger des lambis. Si les lambis ne s'y trouvaient pas, il préparait de longues gaules munies d'un fer, d'un crabe vivant pour charmer les poulpes. (20)<sup>27</sup>

Jérémie's personal success, despite the precariousness of his trade, is echoed, to a certain extent, in Amboise's seeming ability to remain calm despite his economic woes. This is an important aspect of Vodun philosophy. Remaining cool and calm when facing life's dangers constitutes one of the major philosophical ideas sustained throughout this novel and in the following in this study. Both man Cia and Toussine insist that Télumée display self-control at all times. Ironically, Amboise's patience and ability to withstand the various forms of zombification manifest themselves throughout the novel but do not assure him immunity from the stranglehold of Western hegemony. Although he initially rejects Western culture on his return to Guadeloupe, after spending seven years in France, he is

obliged to reinsert himself in Western time when he agrees to lead the cane workers' protest over working conditions in the sugarcane factories. Tragically, he loses his life when hot steam is turned on them. This is an example of the uncontrollable forces of Western time and technology against which the people in Fond-Zombi feel almost powerless. Generally, however, the sacrificial victims in this study are those who would not submit to the communal spirit. Hurston's Joe Starks and Marshall's Jay Johnson are driven by and yield to the all-consuming linearity and efficiency of Western temporality. Schwarz-Bart demonstrates the possibility of protesting one's commodification in a plantation economy, as well as the necessity of rejecting the Western sense of temporality with its mechanistic regulation of time.

Téluée adopts Toussine's profound appreciation of life in all of its manifestations. It is a philosophy which this ancestor passes on through storytelling and her way of life. By spiritually--and in Man Cia's case, physically--transcending the indignities of their world, the women conjure away the curse of the West Indian madness. Their psychological triumph over life is transmitted through their use of language, the language of narration, and the content and form of the folktale.

### **The Magic of the Word: Language as Resistance**

Any discussion of language must include a critique of culture because, as Frantz Fanon states in *Black Skin, White Masks*, "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (17-18). For Vodouists, Africa is their spiritual home, the place to which they will return after death. The emphasis placed on orality and oral tradition in this novel, culturally links the Word to the *pays d'avant*, Africa, where traditionally, the folktale is the most widely known literary genre. According to Ghanaian professor Aitto Agovi, the folktale "encompasses the moral universe of our people. It defines the relationship between man and his environment and nature, and the cosmos even more so than all the other forms of oral literature" (qtd. in Collins, "Orality and Writing" 44). Agovi's view lends support to the anthropological approach to folktale analysis, championed by such eminent scholars as Claude Levi-Strauss in *Structural Anthropology*, which can shed light on the cultural underpinnings of the folktale. In other words, a deeper understanding of the "moral universe" that underpins the form and content of the tale requires an analysis of its form as well as its cultural context.

The connection between the cosmic battle in Vodun cosmology--paradigmatic of the protagonist's fight for control of her life--and the ancestors' role as storytellers, is reflected in a divination session with two babalawos<sup>28</sup> which Rod Davis describes in *American Vodou*:

It was now time for the parable, the symbolic tale to illustrate the cautions they had seen in my reading. Known as apataki, parables are an intrinsic element of a true reading. They are both voluminous--thousands of them--and formal, each parable linked to a specific odu pattern. Priests must memorize the stories in the parables as well as the proper pairing with the odu. Thus priests become not only diviners, but storytellers. (165)

Using parables, the Vodun officiants advise their clients of precautions they should take to guard against present and future negative occurrences in their lives. Similarly, in Schwarz-Bart's novel, storytelling becomes the occasion for lessons on precautionary measures, and Toussine is presented as a master storyteller:

Elle sentait ses mots, ses phrases, possédait l'art de les arranger en images et en sons, en musique pure, en exaltation. Elle savait parler, elle aimait parler pour ses deux enfants, Élie et moi ... avec une parole, on empêche un homme de se briser, ainsi s'exprimait-elle. Les contes étaient disposés en elle comme les pages d'un livre, elle nous en racontait cinq tous les jeudis, mais le cinquième était toujours le même, celui de la fin, le conte de l'Homme qui voulait vivre à l'odeur. (76)<sup>29</sup>

The association of her oral skills with literacy evokes the spirit of Legba--god of the crossroads and the originator of both Esu (figure of writing) and the Signifying Monkey

(figure of speaking).<sup>30</sup> Toussine, aware of the power of the spoken Word, its dual dimension (constructive and destructive), assumes the role of the babalawo who memorizes and recounts symbolic tales or parables. Toussine's success as a storyteller derives from her ability to draw her listeners into the tale of the man who wanted to live on air. The opening proceeds in two stages, an introduction and the initial situation:

Enfants, commençait-elle, savez-vous une chose, une toute petite chose? . . . la façon dont le cœur de l'homme est monté dans sa poitrine, c'est la façon dont il regarde la vie. Si votre cœur est bien monté, vous voyez la vie comme on doit la voir, avec le même humeur qu'un brave en équilibre sur une boule et qui va tomber, mais il durera le plus longtemps possible, voilà. Maintenant écoutez autre chose: les biens de la terre restent à la terre, et l'homme ne possède même pas la peau qui l'enveloppe. Tout ce qu'il possède: les sentiments de son cœur. (76-77)<sup>31</sup>

This parabolic formula directly addresses the moral of the story to follow without appearing to do so. Toussine is stressing the importance the heart plays in adopting a positive view about life. Her allusion to the heart, here, rejoins her earlier assertion that one's attitude, positive or negative, to the country derives from the bigness or smallness of the heart. It is noteworthy that Télumée is much more receptive to Toussine's story than Élie. This again underscores the general sense of alienation that the men experience vis-à-vis their

environment, as opposed to the Lougandor women's strong attachment to their island space.

The holistic sense of connectedness with the universe implicit in this story is also reflected in the storytelling method. Toussine re-ensures audience participation by stopping suddenly and asking:

"La cour dort?"

"Non, non, la Reine, la cour écoute, elle ne dort pas, faisons-nous avec empressement." (78)<sup>32</sup>

This call-and-response identified as a recurrent pattern of communication in black cultures ensures active participation in all spheres of communal life, and is consistent with an inclusive worldview. In Vodun, the call-and-response pattern is crucial to the success of the ceremonies as Lois Wilcken, in *The Drums of Vodou*, writes:

Call-and-response singing is one of the stamps of African-ness in Haitian Vodou music. But it is more than an ancestral relic. The interaction of a *gid* (guide, leader) and *pép la* (congregation, the people) represents the way Haitians believe society should function, that is, with skilled leadership and an engaged collective. In Vodou ritual, the response of the *ousi-s* is a mark of cooperation and solidarity. (96)

Toussine's pattern of storytelling reflects her understanding of the rituals of cooperation and solidarity that aim at ensuring societal cohesiveness as well as individual identification with the values held by the group. She interrupts her storytelling a second time, saying:

"Mes petits braises, dites nous, l'homme est-il un oignon?"

"Non, non, disions nous . . . l'homme n'est pas un oignon qui s'épluche, il n'est pas ça." (78)<sup>33</sup>

Implicit in this wordplay is the suggestion of moral strength. The metaphor of the "onion," indicating a lack of compactness, of a solid, substantive core, underscores the precariousness of human existence. The children's rejection of the metaphor that man can be easily peeled and undone by life's battles also suggests the ritualistic preparation of the children's consciousness to withstand the trials that await them. Only after this active verbal exchange does Toussine continue her story, a tale about the origins of humanity and, simultaneously, about madness.

It is a myth about internal enslavement whose meaning is articulated as a struggle for control. I summarize it as follows:

There was once a young man who took no interest or pleasure in anything except his mare, *Mes Deux Yeux* (My Two Eyes). The latter was given all rights and privileges, including eating out of a silver manger. One day, filled with anguish, the young man suddenly mounted his mare and allowed her to take him anywhere she wished. But he still found nothing and no region to please him. Eventually, he stopped dismounting and did everything on the mare's back, including eating and sleeping. One day, however, he saw a woman with whom he fell in love. But the mare would not allow him to dismount and galloped away. She had become his master.

Leaving the enchantment is achieved in two stages: the description of the situation in which the main characters

find themselves at the end of the story, and the closing formula which contains an implicit and explicit message and serves to bring the audience back to reality:

Le visage défait, plus lugubre que la mort, l'homme gémissait de ville en ville, de campagne en campagne et puis il disparut. Où? Comment? Personne ne le sait, mais on ne le revit jamais plus. Ce soir pourtant, alors que je rentrais ton linge, Télumée, j'entendis un bruit de galop derrière la case, juste sous la touffe du bambou. Aussitôt je tournai la tête dans cette direction, mais la bête me lança une telle ruade que je me suis retrouvée ici, assise dans ma berceuse à vous raconter cette histoire.  
(79)<sup>34</sup>

The call-and-response pattern in both the opening and closing formulas is designed to facilitate instruction as well as to entertain. In this rather comical ending to the tale, Toussine makes a connection between one of the subjects of narration (the horse) and the act of storytelling, thus blurring the boundaries between the marvelous worlds of the tale and the outer narrative. This myth of the past is also an ironic foreshadowing of Élie's fate, which furthers the link between both narrative moments.

Despite the linear progression of the plot, the interruptions and opening and closing formulas also produce a mode of interaction similar to the Vodun divination session described by Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*:

The suppliant, the reader as it were, must produce meaning by stopping the *babalawo* as he chants an *ese*, which in some way strikes the suppliant as being



relevant to his dilemma. Then the *babalawo* interprets the poem for his client and prescribes the appropriate sacrifices. Fairly frequently, the client cannot recognize his situation in the metaphorical language of the poem. (21)

The closing formula of Toussine's tale, a didactic formula very widespread in African tales, contains a very explicit moral: When one mounts the horse, one must keep a firm hold on the reins to maintain control of the animal. It is noteworthy that Toussine only provides this moral after Élie leaves. This suggests Toussine's clairvoyance in her role as spiritual guide or *babalawo*. By interpreting the meaning for her "client," Télumée, only after Élie has left, Toussine underlines her purpose which is to guide the neophyte, Télumée. In addition, Toussine signals her awareness of Élie's inability to recognize himself in the story. The horse, a symbol of "unbridled human passion" in classical mythology,<sup>35</sup> becomes, in Toussine's tale, a metaphor for life, of which Élie later loses control. Conversely, one can derive a different interpretation within the context of Vodun possession.

The horse, critics such as Deren and Hurston inform us, is a metaphor for the person who is possessed by the loa. In Vodun terminology, the loa "mounts" a person; in other words, a person is "mounted" by the loa. From this perspective, the actions of the possessed, and the events which result from the mounting, are the expression of the

will of the rider (Deren 29). Élie's loss of control over his life, over his fate, can therefore be read as his being "ridden," that is, controlled by a loa. The West Indian madness that negates self-control and self-determination, is the antithesis of the Vodun philosophy of empowerment, self-control, and self-determination.

Although Élie's fate is foreshadowed in her story, Toussine's role here is not one of prophetic voyante. She is connected to Legba, "a principle of fluidity, of uncertainty, of the indeterminacy even of one's inscribed fate" (Gates 28). It appears paradoxical, then, that despite the importance placed on divination in Vodun, one's fate is never permanently determined. Human will is the final determinant of one's destiny. Élie does not avoid his fate, incapable as he is of understanding the parable. Télumée, on the other hand, having learned the truth on her grandmother's knee, controls, to some extent, her horse. As the client for whom the story/parable is interpreted--and who is suitably forewarned about the sempiternal struggle consistent with human existence--she will repeatedly refer to this horse metaphor. For instance, following Madame Desaragne's racist verbal attacks, Télumée relates: "Je plongeais précautionneusement les chemises dans l'eau bleautée, dense, chantant déjà, en selle déjà, conduisant mon cheval" (95).<sup>36</sup> Through storytelling and the

act of voicing, the power of the Word is revealed as the women struggle for mastery over the opposing forces in their environment.

Oral instruction, with its high concentration of proverbs and images, therefore provides the protagonist with the wisdom and strength to withstand the rain and wind, the metaphorical meaning of the novel's French title. Notably, the figurative language used throughout *Pluie et Vent* to describe life is often negative. It is the tragic consciousness of past misery and degradation linked, in the novel, with a widespread tendency to self-doubt and self-depreciation. Madame Brindosier would flap her arms triumphantly, like wings, and declare that life was a torn garment, an old rag beyond all mending (50). Germain, the doomed outcast, uses the same metaphor: "[L]a vie est déchirée, de partout déchirée, et le tissu ne se recoud pas" (38).<sup>37</sup> Against these pessimistic expressions about the value of present-day black life, Toussine consistently opposes a more positive language, recalling her early criticism of those who see the beauty of the world and call it ugly (30). According to Ronnie Scharfman in "Mirroring and Mothering," "the heroine Télumée's capacity to posit herself as a speaking subject stems from the ease with which she is able to insert herself into a female history" (89). Noting that the key to her ability to become the

subject of her text lies in her relationship with her grandmother, Scharfman employs the psychoanalytic and feminist theories of Lacan and Elaine Showalter, respectively, to describe the nature of their interaction:

The essence of this bond is its mirroring structure: first and foremost this bonding occurs by means of the "*regard*," and its analogues, such as echo, reflection, or dream. And it is within the parameters of this possibility of reflection, in the perpetual and metaphysical senses of the word, that the girl comes to be and to know. (90)

Nevertheless, as Schwarfman admits, feminist and psychoanalytic theories of female bonding and the self only go so far in interpreting the black, female self.

Mother/child relationships within the diaspora are not limited to the nuclear family but rather include the entire community. When Télumée first arrives at Fond-Zombi, for example, Toussine takes on the mythic aspect of an entire community as she contemplates her granddaughter:

Sous ce regard lointain, calme et heureux qui était le sien, la pièce me parut tout à coup immense et je sentis que d'autres personnes s'y trouvaient, pour lesquelles Reine Sans Nom m'examinait, m'embrassait maintenant, poussant de petits soupirs d'aise. Nous n'étions pas seulement deux vivantes dans une case, au milieu de la nuit, c'était autre chose et bien d'avantage, me semblait-il, mais je ne savais quoi. (48)<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, the soothing words and loving glances that Télumée receives from her grandmother are reinforced by the community and in particular the community of women. Man Cia, for example, on meeting Télumée for the first time,

kisses her affectionately and utters words of encouragement: "[E]lle le voyait déjà, j'étais une vaillante petite négresse," before pronouncing: "[T]u seras sur terre comme une cathédrale" (58).<sup>39</sup> She later uses a drum metaphor--symbol of slave resistance--in advising Télumée to be strong in the face of adversity: "sois une vaillante petite négresse, un vrai tambour à deux faces. Laisse la vie frapper, cogner, mais conserve toujours intacte la face du dessous" (62).<sup>40</sup>

For women of color the repossession of language was twofold: from the evils of racism and from the grip of sexism. These writers conjure away the violence of the coloniser and the misogynist by centering and voicing the female of African descent who appropriates and deconstructs the language of the master. Schwarz-Bart shows how language can be linked with dominance, but also can be resisted. First, she demonstrates the depth of colonial brutality through Madame Desaragne's overtly racist taunting :

[S]avez-vous au juste qui vous êtes, vous les nègres d'ici? . . . vous mangez, vous buvez, vous faites les mauvais, et puis vous dormez . . . un point c'est tout. Mais savez-vous seulement à quoi vous avez échappé? . . . sauvages et barbares que vous seriez en ce moment, à courir la brousse, à danser nus et à déguster les individus en potée. (93-94)<sup>41</sup>

Against this demonstration of barbarism, Schwarz-Bart opposes Télumée's dignified reaction, which in turn

indicates how well she takes Toussine's advice that certain words were null and void, all very well to listen to but better forgotten:

Je me faufilais à travers ces paroles comme si je nageais dans l'eau la plus claire qui soit, sentant sur ma nuque, mes mollets, mes bras, le petit vent d'est qui les rafraichissait, et, me félicitant d'être sur terre une petite négresse irréductible, un vrai tambour à deux peaux, selon l'expression de man Cia, je lui abandonnais la première face afin qu'elle s'amuse, la patronne, qu'elle cogne dessus, et moi-même par en dessous je restais intacte, et plus intacte il n'y a pas. (94)<sup>42</sup>

In addition to Toussine's well-taken advice, Man Cia's words of encouragement, represented by the drum metaphor, also empower Télumée to conjure away the vicious language of this colonial mistress: "[J]e prenais ces paroles et m'asseyais de tout mon vaillant poids sur elles, paroles de blanc, rien que ça" (93).<sup>43</sup> Télumée moves out of the force of her silence with Madame Desaragne to effectively counter Monsieur Desaragne's attempt at rape:

Je me laissai aller dans les bras de M. Desaragne, et comme il se défaisait d'une main, je murmurai doucement . . . j'ai un petit couteau ici et si je n'en avais pas, mes ongles y suffiraient . . . M. Desaragne ne semblait pas m'avoir entendue et comme il poursuivait son entreprise, je continuai sur le même ton calme et froid . . . M. Desaragne, je le jure sur la tête du bon Dieu, vous ne pourrez plus entrer dans la chambre des petites bonnes, car vous n'aurez plus de quoi. (110-11)<sup>44</sup>

Ironically, her experiences as a live-in domestic with the racist white couple pale in comparison with the danger

which her common-law husband, Élie, poses to Télumée's psyche.

The employment of orality is a move to find new language and new starting-points from which to express the reality of impoverished women's lives in the French colony --a life of hardships grounded in oppressive socio-economic conditions, but also threatened by forces within their community. Élie, her childhood friend and first love, initially showers her with loving glances and affectionate words equal to those of her spiritual mothers. And Télumée devotes herself to him completely: "Lorsque Élie me regardait, alors seulement j'existais et je sentais bien que s'il venait un jour à se détourner de moi, je m'évanouirais à nouveau dans le néant" (141).<sup>45</sup> Scharfman describes her relationship with Élie as "one of total twinship, identification and reflection," where the "potential for obliterating her sense of self is therefore much more powerful" (96-97). For this critic, it is the feminine values instilled in Télumée by her grandmother which will be severely tested. I suggest, rather, that it is the Vodun values of healing through living in symbiosis with one's community and natural environment which are tested here. Toussine, as healer, soothes Télumée's wounds literally and figuratively, but the latter must also draw

on her "inner strength" garnered not from simple female bonding, but from an entire cosmology.

The tension reflected in negative and positive definitions of black life is also translated into the dual style of expression in this novel--French/Creole. The use of dual languages, Condé writes in "Créolité without the Creole Language," reflects the hybridity of two Caribbean cultures and the efforts of a marginalized people to insert themselves into the dominant discourse:

Caribbean writers (for example, Zobel, D'Costa, and others) chose a simpler strategy of embedding Creole words in their texts, as if by their very presence the words injected the marginalized and despised culture into the heart of the dominant one and in so doing, destroyed the latter's hegemony. (103)

The abundance of Creole proverbs in *Pluie et Vent* has been discussed by linguists such as Jean Barnabé, one of the leaders of the international Creole movement. In his three-volume study of Guadeloupean and Martinican Creole, *Fondal-natal*, Bernabe notes that while Simone Schwarz-Bart has written her work in French, her language, marked by its fluidity and limpidity, is worked by the novelist's belonging to the Creole-speaking space. Bernabe identifies many instances of Creole influence in *Pluie et Vent*, pointing out that the figurative expression "[S]ois une vaillante petite négresse, un vrai tambour à deux faces" (*Pluie et Vent* 62) is similar to the two creole expressions



"tanbou a dé bonda" (the French "tambour à deux culs") and "kouto a dé lanm" ("couteau à deux tranchants") (Bernabé 257). Bernabé cites the following example as one of the most successful demonstrations of inscribing Creole in the French language without altering it grammatically: "Mais quand l'aube se leva sur le cercueil de l'ange Médard, bal fini, violon en sac, les gens se présentèrent devant moi et me dirent . . ." (*Pluie and Vent* 238-39). This sentence corresponds to the creole proverb: "Bal fini, vyolon dan sak," whose meaning would correspond to the French "Le bal (est) fini, les violons (sont) dans leur étui" (Bernabé 259). Bernabé concludes that the novelist refuses to simply insert the Creole oral tradition but rather, operates a veritable reassembling of the French language (269). By recognizing the blending of vernacular and French linguistic structures that distinguishes Schwarz-Bart's use of the French language, Bernabé reveals a pattern of subversion in which Schwarz-Bart transforms the French even as she appears to embrace it. Such subversion through syncretism characterizes the Vodun aesthetic of resistance that enabled African culture to survive. In other words, Schwarz-Bart's mixture of "creolisms" and French has created a hybrid style of expression reflective of the adaptability of Vodun culture. Moreover, the richness of Schwarz-Bart's proverbs asserts the wisdom of

those who live in symbiosis with their environment, and whose well-being depends both on its generosity and, especially, on their ability to see beyond the negative. In transcribing the rhythms of folk life, Schwarz-Bart also injects a greater degree of musicality into the French.

The performative aspect of language, which has long been a consideration for West Indian writers, comes out of a Vodun aesthetic. In this regard, Guyanese scholar Gordon Rohlehr's definition of the oral tradition in the Caribbean as "a heritage of song, speech and performance visible in such folk forms as the litanic work songs, chants, battle songs, Queh Queh songs, sermons of both the grassroots and establishment churches, riddles, jokes and word-games" (qtd. in Merle Collins 38) refers to the performative and liberatory aspect of Vodun that informs the texts in this study. Likewise, Trinidadian playwright Earl Lovelace writes from this oral tradition in *The Dragon Can't Dance*, where he attempts to convey to the rigorous standard English he employs, the musical rhythms of his island:

There is dancing in the calypso. Dance! If the words mourn the death of a neighbour, the music insists that you dance; if it tells the troubles of a brother, the music says dance. Dance to the hurt! Dance! If you catching hell, dance, and the government don't care, dance! Your woman take your money and run away with another man, dance. Dance! Dance! Dance! (13-14)

This passage bears witness to the rhythms of life, as well as the manner of relieving and expressing the personal and politico-historical pain of a people. In *Pluie et Vent*, Man Cia's sweeping statement that "seuls les nègres sont musiciens" (180),<sup>46</sup> underscores the importance of music, a major element of the poetic substance of the works under study.

Music conveys or accompanies a wide range of human emotions in this novel. It is introduced at joyful moments such as Toussine's wedding, which was remembered particularly for the music. And the ability of music to relieve the pain of a difficult existence is also underscored in first Victoire's and then Télumée's constant singing. In the following example, singing serves as a palliative against Télumée's abusive employers:

[C]es jours-là je me mettais à chanter, tout en faisant mon travail, et mon coeur se desserrait car derrière une peine, il y a une autre peine, c'étaient là les paroles de grand-mère. Et je voyais se dessiner dans l'ombre le sourire de Reine Sans Nom, le cheval ne doit pas te conduire, ma fille, c'est toi qui doit conduire le cheval, [. . .] et je faisais mon ouvrage en chantant, et lorsque je chantaïs je coupais ma peine, je hachais ma peine, et ma peine tombait dans la chanson, et je conduisais mon cheval. (92)<sup>47</sup>

Music becomes an integral element of the Lougandor women's attempts to lead their figurative horse. It forms the backdrop of Télumée's painful departure from the home she shared with Élie, and it is also present at her moments of

triumph. Most importantly, it is often associated with nature. The following tale underscores the holistic cosmology in which the power of song is embedded. The story deals with a little huntsman who

s'en va dans le bois et rencontre, et qu'est-ce qu'il rencontra, fille? . . . il rencontra l'oiseau savant et tandis qu'il le prenait pour cible, fermait les yeux, visait, il entendit cet étrange sifflement:

*Petit chasseur ne me tue pas*

*Si tu me tues je te tuerai aussi.*

Selon grand-mère, effrayé par le chant de l'oiseau savant, le petit chasseur abaissait son fusil et se promenait dans la forêt, lui trouvant pour la première fois un charme. Je tremblais pour l'oiseau qui n'avait que son chant et ainsi, allongée sur ma roche, [. . .] je partais moi aussi en songe, m'envolais, me prenais pour l'oiseau qu'aucune balle ne pouvait atteindre, car il *conjurait la vie par son chant*.

(75; my emphasis)<sup>48</sup>

The interdependence of man and nature--suggested in the life-affirming song--strikes a responsive chord in Télumée, who immediately identifies with the bird. More powerful than the rifle, song in this tale signifies the triumph of good over evil. Additionally, its healing properties are juxtaposed with its destructive potential: Victoire sings because she is wary of the destructive power of the word, whereas the healing and subversive properties of song are borne out when Toussine, combing Télumée's hair, conjures up the memory of both good times and of slavery:

[E]lle modulait finement des mazoukes lentes, des valse et des biguines doux-sirop [. . .]. Il y avait Yaya, Ti-Rose Congo, Agoulou, Peine procurée par soi-même et tant d'autres merveilles des temps

anciens, [. . .] pour les chants d'esclaves, soudain la fine voix se détachait de ses traits de vieille et s'élevait dans les airs, montait très haut dans l'aigu [. . .]. Et j'écoutais la voix déchirante, son appel mystérieux, et l'eau commençait à se troubler sérieusement dans ma tête, surtout lorsque grand-mère chantait:

*Maman où est où est où est Idahé  
Ida est vendue et livrée Idahé  
Ida est vendue et livrée Idahé. (51-52)<sup>49</sup>*

History, the memory of slavery evoked in Toussine's song, again comes to mind as Télumée is forced to work in the dreaded cane fields to sustain herself. Enslaved Africans' ability to be sustained by the work songs is vividly portrayed in the following description of Télumée's own experience:

Et le jour se levait, et je reprenais ma route avec la sueur de la veille, les piquants de la veille, et j'arrivais sur la terre de l'usine et je brandissais mon coutelas, et je hachais ma peine comme tout le monde, et quelqu'un se mettait à chanter et notre peine à tous tombait dans la chanson, et c'était ça, la vie dans les cannes. (201)<sup>50</sup>

Significantly, song does not operate here on a simply descriptive or decorative element. It is integrated into the action of the plot and thus constitutes, as I have argued, an essential aspect of the overall holistic cosmology that informs and connects both the form and content of the novel. Amboise, in coming to work in the cane fields, for example, begins to sing a song which evokes the memory of happier times and thus serves not only as a catalyst for the love that will develop between

Télumée and Amboise, but also marks the beginning of Télumée's renaissance from the state of zombification to which she is reduced in the cane fields. Her response to the call to rise above the misery of the cane by remembering who she is, and from whence she comes, is echoed later, in her response to another call, that of the drum. Notably, the entire array of music--song, dance and drum--figures strongly in Amboise's seduction of Télumée and her rebirth from the zombifying effects of the canefield.

Drum, another musical component of Vodun ritual, features in this novel on both figurative and literal levels. It is the image of resistance that Télumée acquires in her childhood when Man Cia exhorts her to be "a fine little Negress, a real drum with two sides. Let life bang and thump, but keep the underside always intact." Beverly Ormerod rightly points to the association between the endowment of the drum--symbol of African ancestry, slave resistance, racial solidarity and rhythmic energy--with the sound, enduring quality of the tree and of the wooden boat that defies the tempests (120).

The link made between the tree and the drum is important; for they are both major Vodun symbols of connection with the spirit world, of resistance to cultural and political enslavement, and of community solidarity

reflected in the coumbite. The coumbite, explains Harold Courlander in *Haiti Singing*, arose out of the need for everlasting work: "They say it is descended from African communal labor societies [. . .]. The customs of the coumbites of the north vary from those of the south, but in general it is a loose, voluntary agricultural system based on mutual assistance." <sup>51</sup>

Schwarz-Bart underlines this communal spirit when Amboise, playing the drum and accompanied by members of the community armed with an assortment of musical instruments, presents himself for the first time at Télumée's home to take up residence with her formally. Significantly, Télumée's eventual response to the drumming constitutes the climax of her rebirth from her zombified state:

Au petit matin, Olympe me poussa silencieusement vers le centre du cercle. L'assemblée se tut. Je demeurai immobile devant le tambour. Les doigts d'Amboise bougeaient doucement sur la peau de cabri, semblant y chercher comme un signe, l'appel de mon poulx. Saisissant les deux pans de ma robe, je me mis à tourner comme une toupie détraquée [. . .]. Tout à coup, je sentis l'eau du tambour couler sur mon coeur et lui redonner vie, à petites notes humides, d'abord, puis à larges retombées qui m'ondoyaient et m'aspergeaient tandis que je tournais au milieu du cercle. (210)<sup>52</sup>

Finally pushed into responding to the call of the drum, Télumée dances as one possessed. This climactic scene recaptures the highpoint of Vodun initiation ceremonies which, critics agree, is that of possession by the loa.

According to Gerdès Fleurant, the dance--an initiation to life and, at the same time, a celebration of life--along with the drumming and singing, is "the main conduit and channel of communication with the lwa and the ancestors" (152). Hence Télumée, her spirit deadened by the dehumanizing life of the cane cutter, needs to reconnect with the ancestors, with her spiritual community, in order to heal and to once again embrace life. Through the mysterious powers of the drums Télumée becomes possessed by the spirit of her ancestors. It is a climactic moment that is echoed in each of the other novels under study.

Through her expert manipulation of language, Schwarz-Bart displays her mastery of the oral tradition and its cosmological implications. Thanks to the many stories, positive images and messages the protagonist/narrator receives from her grandmother and the community of women, she acquires the wisdom and courage she will need to survive the harsh reality of life in colonial territory. Toussine and Man Cia provide the moral force and the sense of historical continuity that sustain Télumée spiritually and ontologically, and enable her to successfully withstand and/or recover from the repeated assaults on her psyche. By overturning the conventional racial and gendered images and ideas through her centering on and giving a voice to a female member of an oppressed race, Schwarz-Bart makes an



effective contribution to the revision of the discourse of the Other.

This novel portrays the marvelous nature of folk reality grounded in colonial history. It is reflected in the negative definitions of life interspersed throughout the novel--and mainly connected to the sense of chaos and fatalism experienced ontologically by the inhabitants of Fond-Zombi--as well as in the positive associations with space articulated by the ancestor, Toussine. This counter discourse provides the protagonist with endurance and hope, essential components of survival. The novel, therefore, successfully conveys the life-affirming philosophy and subversive strategies that have been characterized as Vodun. The enduring optimism of the Lougandor women, despite the overwhelming obstacles to a better socio-economic life in colonial Guadeloupe, recalls the spiritual strength of Haitian Vodun adherents in an environment of unrelieved, unbelievable poverty.

Colonialism that maintains the conditions of slavery is clearly identified as the source of the "mal" in this novel. The connections between chronic poverty, illiteracy, alcoholism, fatalism, and the cane workers' fruitless and fatal strike for better working conditions are obvious. Schwarz-Bart's novel lays emphasis on the spiritual quest for happiness within the context of the

real abuses of colonialism. This constitutes the major contribution of the text to the continuing struggle of the French Caribbean peasantry for survival. It is the Vodun spirit of resistance that sustains "New World" Africans in the face of the "marvelous" abuses of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For René Ménénil, "West Indian time, necessary for a chronology consistent with historical West Indian events, evaporates at any moment, devoured by the time of Mediterranean history. And West Indian space is disturbed by a geography of the elsewhere" (47; my translation).

<sup>2</sup> "The place had a kind of mystery, as if, in some long distant past, it had been inhabited by men who knew how to rejoice in rivers, trees, and sky" (Bray 131). Throughout this chapter, I rely on Barbara Bray's 1974 English translation, *The Bridge of Beyond*, for all translations from Schwarz-Bart's original French text.

<sup>3</sup> "At certain times everyone there would be filled with dread, like travelers lost in a strange land" (Bray 5).

<sup>4</sup> "When, in the long hot blue days, the madness of the West Indies starts to swirl around in the air above the villages, bluffs, and plateaus, men are seized with dread at the thought of the fate hovering over them, preparing to swoop on one or another like a bird of prey, and while they are incapable of offering the slightest resistance" (Bray 34).

<sup>5</sup> "I don't know if the day will ever come when I'll circle her finger with gold. I don't know [. . .]. Tomorrow our water may turn into vinegar or into wine, but if it's vinegar, don't curse me [. . .]. For tell me, isn't it a common sight, here in Fond-Zombi, the sight of a man being transformed into a devil?" (Bray 114-15).

<sup>6</sup> "Oh," he moaned silently, "what I've always feared is happening. We no longer live on solid earth, Telumee, we're out at sea amid the currents, and what I wonder is whether I'm going to drown outright" (Bray 141).

<sup>7</sup> "I stabbed Angebert, and you can kill me. Go on—you've every right. But I swear it's not my fault. No, not my fault" (Bray 33).

<sup>8</sup> Maya Deren explains that the center post (poteau mitan) is the axis of the metaphysical cosmos: "Around this poteau-mitan revolve the ritual movements and the dance; at its base the offerings are placed; and through it the loa enter the perestyle" (36).

<sup>9</sup> "I was also very interested when the men started to talk about spirits, spells, a man who'd been seen the week before running about like a dog, and old Ma Cia, who flew about every night over the hills and valleys and cabins of Fond-Zombi, her ordinary human form insufficient for her. [. . .] One day Old Abel told the story of how Ma Cia had given him the scar he had on his arm, a scratch from the claws of the flying Negress" (Bray 48).

<sup>10</sup> "[s]he told me an evil spirit had been sent against your cabin, to fill it with desolation. To begin with, the spirit entered into Elie's body, and that is why his blood fights against itself and tears him apart bit by bit. Ma Cia told me to tell you she isn't asleep up there in her forest, and as Elie has gone to pieces bit by bit, so she will put him together again. The first thing is to take the spell off your cabin, so that the spirit no longer has any power over you. Tomorrow I'm going to burn some herbs she gave me, to chase the spirit back at once to his master. You know, Telumee, evil is very strong" (Bray 153).

<sup>11</sup> "Elie [. . .] arrived foaming with rage. He kicked the smoking shells over and yelled that he wouldn't have any witches around his house. Traps would be set all over the ground from now on, and woe betide anyone who set foot on it" (Bray 154).

<sup>12</sup> "The truth is that Ma Cia is a good woman, but it's best not to get on the wrong side of her" (Bray 50).

<sup>13</sup> "I learned how to set people and animals free, how to break spells and turn sorcery back on the sorcerers. But whenever she was at the point of telling me the secret of metamorphosis, something held me back, something prevented me from exchanging my woman's shape and two breasts for that of a beast or flying succubus" (Bray 186).

<sup>14</sup> "Sun risen, sun set, the days slip past and the sand blown by the wind will engulf my boat. But I shall die

here, where I am, standing in my little garden. What happiness!" (Bray 246).

<sup>15</sup> "Friend, nothing hunts the Negro but his own heart" (Bray 143).

<sup>16</sup> "A man's country may be cramped or vast according to the size of his heart" (Bray 3).

<sup>17</sup> "[I]f I could choose it's here in Guadeloupe that I'd be born again, suffer and die. Yet not long back my ancestors were slaves on this volcanic, hurricane-swept, mosquito-ridden, nasty-minded island" (Bray 3).

<sup>18</sup> "[T]he more I learned the more it seemed that the main thing escaped me" (Bray 46).

<sup>19</sup> "If you want to see a slave," she said coldly, "you've only to go down to the market at Pointe-a-Pitre and look at the poultry in the cages, tied up, and at the terror in their eyes. And if you want to know what a master is like, you've only to go to Galba, to the Desaragnes' house at Belle-Feuille. They're only the descendants, but it will give you an idea" (Bray 54).

<sup>20</sup> "For the first time in my life I realized that slavery was not some foreign country, some distant region from which a few very old people came, like the two or three who still survived in Fond-Zombi" (Bray 56)

<sup>21</sup> "'Oh' said Ma Cia. 'So the dead are served first now, are they?'

'You know Jeremiah always had a weakness for stewed pork,' said Grandmother, smiling.

'And how is he?' asked Ma Cia gravely.

'He hasn't forgotten me,' said Grandmother happily. He comes to see me every night without fail. And he hasn't changed, he's just the same as when he was alive.'

'But is he well?' said her friend.

'He's very well,' answered Grandmother gravely" (Bray 53).

<sup>22</sup> "'It's not death I'm so pleased about,' she said, 'but what will come after. The time when we'll never leave each other again, my little crystal glass. Can you imagine our life, with me following you everywhere, invisible, and people never suspecting they have to deal with two women, not just one? Can you imagine that?'" (Bray 170).

<sup>23</sup> "Ever since I'd come to La Folie I'd been supported by the presence of Queen Without a Name, who wielded half my hoe, held half my machete, and bore half my troubles, so that thanks to her I really was a Negress that was a drum with two hearts. At least that was what I thought, until Ma Cia changed into a dog and disappeared. Then I realized that the protection of the dead can't replace the voice of the living" (Bray 190).

<sup>24</sup> "Everything had a place, a time, a precise reason; nothing was left to chance" (Bray 85).

<sup>25</sup> "Then came the end of the harvest, when there was no work to be found and it was time to be smart. The Negroes' savings had melted away more rapidly than ever that year" (Bray 31).

<sup>26</sup> Germain "prowled around L'Abandonnee like a wild beast in a cage" (Bray 31).

<sup>27</sup> "He continued to go out alone, never bringing back an empty boat, however niggardly the sea. Scandalmongers said he used witchcraft and had a spirit go out fishing in his stead when no one else was about. But in fact his only secret was his enormous patience. When the fish would not bite at all, he dived for lambis. If there were no lambis, he put out long rods with hooks or live crabs to tempt the octopi" (Bray 13).

<sup>28</sup> The highest priestly order in Vodun, interpreter of Ifa.

<sup>29</sup> "She was conscious of her words, her phrases, and possessed the art of arranging them in images and sounds, in pure music, in exaltation. She was good at talking, and loved to do so for her two children, Elie and me. 'With a word a man can be stopped from destroying himself,' she would say. The stories were ranged inside her like pages of a book. She used to tell us five every Thursday, but the fifth, the last, was always the same: the story of the Man Who Tried to Live on Air" (Bray 69).

<sup>30</sup> In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., argues that "[T]he figure of writing appears to be peculiar to the myth of Esu, while the figure of speaking, of oral discourse densely structured rhetorically, is peculiar to the myth of the Signifying Monkey" (21).

<sup>31</sup> "'Children,' she would begin, 'do you know something, a tiny little thing? The way a man's heart is set in his chest is the way he looks at life. If your heart is put

in well, you see life as one ought to to see it, in the same spirit as a man balancing on a ball—he's certain to fall, but he'll stick it out as long as possible. And now hear another thing: the goods of the earth remain the earth's, and man does not own even the skin he's wrapped in. All he owns are the feelings of his heart'" (Bray 70).

<sup>32</sup> "'Is the court sleeping?'  
'No, no, Queen, the court is listening,' we'd hasten to reply'" (Bray 70).

<sup>33</sup> "'Tell me, my little embers—is man an onion?'  
'No, no," we'd answer [. . .]. 'Man isn't an onion that can be peeled, not at all'" (Bray 72).

<sup>34</sup> "His face drawn, gloomier than death, the man groaned on from town to town, country to country, and then he disappeared. Where to? How? No one knows, but he was never seen again. But this evening, as I was taking in your washing, Telumee, I heard the sound of galloping behind the cabin, just under the clump of bamboo. I turned my head to look, but the beast aimed such a kick at me that I found myself back here, sitting in my rocker telling you this story" (Bray 72).

<sup>35</sup> Beverly Ormerod provides an interesting description of the symbolic value of the horse in ancient mythology: the horse, the archetypal phallic animal, is an ancient symbol of unbridled human passion, and has widespread associations with headlong catastrophe, darkness and death. Since Plato, in his *Phaedrus*, equated the unruly horse with lust and its driver with the noble soul, the uncontrollable steed has become a traditional image of reckless, violent behaviour, while the skilful rider is an image of wisdom and self-mastery (120).

<sup>36</sup> "I dipped the shirts carefully in the thick blue water, singing already, in the saddle already, riding my horse" (Bray 89).

<sup>37</sup> "My life is torn apart, torn from end to end, and the stuff cannot be mended" (Bray 31).

<sup>38</sup> "Under that distant, calm, happy look of hers, the room seemed suddenly immense, and I sensed there were others there for whom Queen Without a Name was examining me, then kissing me with little sighs of contentment. We were not merely two living beings in a cabin in the middle of the

night, but, it seemed to me, something different, something much more, though I did not know what" (Bray 41).

<sup>39</sup> "You will rise over the earth like a cathedral" (Bray 51).

<sup>40</sup> "Be a fine little Negress, a real drum with two sides. Let life bang and thump, but keep the underside always intact" (Bray 56).

<sup>41</sup> "[D]o you even know what you've escaped? You might be wild savages now, running through the bush, dancing naked, and eating people stewed in pots (Bray 87-88).

<sup>42</sup> "I glided in and out between the words as if I were swimming in the clearest water, feeling the cooling breeze on my neck, my arms, the back of my legs. And, thankful to be a little Negress that was irreducible, a real drum with two sides, as Ma Cia put it, I left one side to her, the mistress, for her to amuse herself, for her to thump on, and I, underneath, I remained intact, nothing ever more so" (Bray 88).

<sup>43</sup> "I took the words and sat on them with all my sturdy weight--white man's words, that's all" (Bray 87).

<sup>44</sup> "I made no resistance as Monsieur Desaragne put his arms around me, but as he unbuttoned himself with one hand, I murmured softly: 'I've got a little knife here. And even if I hadn't, my nails would be enough.' He seemed not to have heard, and as he went on with what he was doing I continued in the same cold calm voice: 'Monsieur Desaragne, I swear to God you won't be able to go into another maid's room because you won't have the wherewithal'" (Bray 104).

<sup>45</sup> "When Elie looked at me, then, only then, I existed, and I knew well that if ever one day he turned away from me I should disappear again into the void" (Bray 137).

<sup>46</sup> "[O]nly Negroes are musicians" (Bray 177.)

<sup>47</sup> "On those days I would sing as I went about my work, and my heart would grow lighter, for behind one pain there is another--that was what Grandmother said. And through the darkness I would see Queen Without a Name's smile--'The horse musn't ride you, my girl, you must ride it'--[. . .] and I would sing as I worked, and when I sang I diluted my pain, chopped it into pieces, and it flowed into the song, and I rode my horse" (Bray 86).

<sup>48</sup> "goes into the forest and meets--'What did he meet, girl?'--he met the bird that could talk, and as he made to shoot it, shot his eyes, aimed, he heard a strange whistling sound:

Little huntsman, don't kill me

If you kill me I'll kill you too.

Grandmother said the little huntsman, frightened by the talking bird, lowered his gun and walked through the forest, taking pleasure in it for the first time. I trembled for the bird, which had nothing but its song, and lying there on my rock . . . I too set off dreaming, flew away, took myself for the bird that couldn't be hit by any bullet because it invoked life with its song" (Bray 68).

<sup>49</sup> "[S]he would give a delicate rendering of slow mazurkas, waltzes, and beguines, as sweet as syrup, for, with her, happiness expressed itself in melancholy. She sang 'Yaya,' 'Ti-Rose Congo,' 'Agoulou,' 'Trouble Brought on Yourself,' and many other splendid things from the old days, [. . .] But for the slave songs her pure voice detached itself from her old woman's face, soaring up into amplitude and depth, [. . .] I listened to the heartrending voice, to its mysterious appeal, and the waters of my mind began to be troubled, especially when Grandmother sang:

Mama where is where is where is Idahe

She is sold and sent away Idahe

She is sold and sent away Idahe." (Bray 44-45)

<sup>50</sup> "And the sun rose, and I set out again with the sweat of the day before, the prickles of the day before, and I got to the fields belonging to the factory, and I wielded my machete, and I lashed into my affliction like everyone else, and someone would start to sing, and the affliction of us all would flow into the song. And that was life in the canefields" (Bray 197).

<sup>51</sup> "The day of the *coumbite* the drummers arise at dawn and begin the march to the residence of their host. As they pass along the trail they play a *rappel*, and the workers join them from house to house, bringing hoes, sickles, or machetes. Perhaps they sing and dance behind the drums as they go. If it is a large *coumbite* there may be a great crowd with the drummers by the time they arrive at the place of work" (Courlander 63-64).

<sup>52</sup> "Amboise uttered one summons after another throughout the night, and people came and went in and out of the circle, while I sat on my stone, not wanting to resist the drum and not wanting to yield to it. Early in the morning,



Olympia pushed me silently into the middle of the circle. Everyone stopped talking. I stood motionless in front of the drum. Amboise's fingers tapped the goatskin lightly, as if looking for a sign, for the rhythm of my pulse. Seizing my skirt in either hand, I started to whirl like a top out of control [. . .]. Suddenly I felt the waters of the drum flow over my heart and give it life again, at first in little damp notes, then in great falls that sprinkled and baptized me as I whirled in the middle of the circle" (Bray 206-07).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PAULE MARSHALL'S RITUALS OF RECONNECTION

Critical works on ancestor veneration often tend to be accompanied by a general lament on the fading of this belief system in the modern world. Almost half a century ago, Maya Deren noted an increasing loss of intimacy between the gods and their serviteurs:

Today the gods complain more and more frequently that they are not served well enough, nor feasted adequately. And, indeed, if their energies are not restored, they may, for want of proper devotion, in turn soon grow too weak to support the devotee.[. . .] The psychic blood of the people is growing thinner; the great gods appear less frequently. (95-96)

Exactly four decades later, Malidoma Somé, a West African scholar, medicine man and diviner, reiterates, in *Ritual: Power, Healing and Community* (1993), this lament of the fading and disappearing of ritual in modern society, which leads to "the weakening of links with the spirit world, and general alienation of people from themselves and others" (30).<sup>1</sup> Somé attributes this loss mainly to the capitalist machinery in the modern world, which "eats at the psyche and moves its victims faster and faster along, as they are progressively emptied out of their spiritual and psychic fuel" (34).

In addition to the radical change in human relations brought about by industrialization, the relationship between peoples of the diaspora and the ancestors has been disrupted by the growing hegemony of the Western linear notion of time. John S. Mbiti writes, in *African Religions and Philosophy*, that the African individual "is immersed in a religious participation which starts before birth and continues after his death" (15). This sense of time is connected with religious or agricultural cycles and rituals, unlike the mechanistic regulation of time in Western industrial societies. Unfortunately, Mbiti buttresses his contention by quoting Dominique Zahan, who mistakenly labels the cyclical worldview in traditional African communities as "regressive" and concludes that it constitutes a falsely complacent attempt to use the past to justify present conditions (47). Renowned Nigerian playwright and scholar, Wole Soyinka, on the other hand, offers a more cogent explanation of African time:

The belief of the Yoruba in the contemporaneous existence within his daily experience of these aspects of time has long been recognised but again misinterpreted. It is no abstraction. The Yoruba is not, like the European man, concerned with the purely conceptual aspects of time; they are too concretely realised in his own life, religion, sensitivity, to be mere tags for explaining the metaphysical order of his world.[. . .] *life, present life contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn.* (143-44; emphasis mine)

Soyinka's concept of simultaneity rejoins Abena Busia's use of the term "retrogressive" (27) to describe the reclaiming of the past in order to understand the present and the future. Vodun deals with present life. Neither regressive nor progressive, the cyclical concept of time emphasizes the here and now. Yet, the acute sense of the present necessitates an understanding of the past and an awareness of the future.

As I have indicated in the previous chapter, it has often been suggested that African diasporic peoples' ignorance of history, of our ancestral past, has contributed to our alienation from self and from others similarly located within the diaspora. When Malidoma Somé states that "there are no elders to help anyone remember through initiation of his or her important place in the community" (30), he is merely echoing a general sense of hopelessness about the future. Yet Paule Marshall's novel, *Praisesong for the Widow*, while bearing witness to the devastating effects on the black psyche of the loss of our gods and rituals, nevertheless contains a blueprint for recognizing and embracing the rituals and the ancestors. Like Simone Schwarz-Bart, Marshall demonstrates, in her novel, the existence of these

spiritual guides in everyday life. They are the elders, those (generally female) members of the family and of the community who use the power of the Word to conjure up and pass on the empowering myths and rituals of yesteryear. Her work, in this sense, is optimistic. It is written out of a worldview and a sensibility that understands the interconnectedness between peoples, between the material and spiritual world, between past and present, and between the physical and spiritual self. Gay Wilentz, in *Binding Cultures*, points out two distinctive manifestations of ancestor veneration which are explored in Paule Marshall's novel: The ancestor functions on a personal level in terms of the protagonist's growth, through the aid of spiritual guides Aunt Cuney, Lebert Joseph and the community of women; the ancestor also appears as the force of a communal ritual, linking past, present, and future, Africa and the diaspora. (109) In this chapter, I will focus on the rituals in *Praisesong* that reconnect a divided self and a divided community. I will argue that Marshall's focus on conciliating the spiritual dislocations within the self and within the diasporic community derives from a Vodun holistic philosophy that offers spiritual liberation from the Western values that have been assimilated by persons of African descent in the "New World."

### **Connections in Time and Place**

Africa as real and mythical space has captured the imagination of her children since they were first brought in chains to the Americas.<sup>2</sup> Caribbean scholar Carol Boyce Davies and others have pointed to Paule Marshall's consistent emphasis of the commonalities among African diasporic peoples in all of her work. This motif has led Barbadian writer Edward Braithwaite to call hers a "literature of reconnection" (qtd. in Davies 119). One of the ways diasporic writers have established links with the Motherland is through myths. Noted religion scholar Mircea Eliade provides a useful definition of myth for this study. Eliade's definition of myth as a source of human significance is one of a multiplicity of definitions proliferating since the classical age, when Greek scholars commented skeptically on the stories of adventures by the Olympian gods (*Myth and Reality* 148). Through the centuries, myth has been identified variously as allegory of nature, embellished history, expression of the human spirit, projection of unconscious desires, ideology perpetuated to maintain the power of a dominant group, and justification for ritual, among other concepts. Through significant anthropological endeavor, writes Eliade, "the Western world has discovered that in archaic and

traditional cultures the myth represents a sacred and true story, and constitutes the exemplary model for all significant human activities" (Foreword xv). The subject of mythic narratives, according to Eliade, is the activities of gods or superhumans in the eternal time before the present conditions of the world and human life existed (*Myth and Reality* 5-6). This writer claims that humans achieve a kind of communion with the supernatural beings by ceremonially recounting myths or re-enacting them through ritual. Those who re-live myth enter into the transcendent time of the gods' presence and activities (*Myth and Reality* 18). In so doing, they experience "absolute reality," that is, the presence of the supernatural (*The Sacred and the Profane* 202).

Joseph Campbell, in his foreword to *Divine Horsemen*, draws striking parallels between these "universal" theories and Vodun:

The day-to-day epiphanies of Voudoun are experiences of a crisis of becoming [. . .] "full of the god", such as precipitated much of the mythology preserved in Greek and Roman literary documents. We are not far from Hermes when in the presence of Ghede; not far from Ares when in that of Ogoun; and when with Erzulie, not far from the foam-born Cyprian. (3)

The climax of Vodun initiation is operated through a reenactment of the initial birth of the race. Maya Deren, defining myth as "the facts of the mind made manifest in a

fiction of matter" (21), describes this "second birth" as follows:

[T]he novice is purified of the past, relieved of possessions, made innocent, placed nascent in the womb solitude of a dark room. The matter, which is himself, and the myth of the race are joined. His solitary meditation is a gestation and, in the end, a man emerges by ordeal, to be newly named, newly rejoiced in. (23)

Through ritual, then, one relives the myth of origins and becomes one with the universe by conciliating spirit and matter.

Deren elaborates that for the Haitian, this spirit or self, called the *gros-bon-ange*, is the invisible identity, the "metaphysical double of the physical being, and since it does not exist in the world of matter, it is the immortal twin who survives the mortal man." It differs from the *ti-bon-ange*, which refers to the function of the soul: "The universal commitment towards good, the notion of truth as desirable." For the Haitian, the *ti-bon-ange*, being "changeless and impersonal, one of the constants of the cosmos, inspires a reciprocal detachment," unlike the *gros-bon-ange*, on which the Haitian depends for guidance in acting in a manner that promotes the well-being of the community. It remains answerable to the community, since it cannot develop independently of the collective welfare.



Thus Vodun is "structured for the controlled development of a man's *gros-bon-ange* and the enforcement of a collective morality in action" (Deren 26-27).

The role of the ancestor in Marshall's novel therefore involves controlling the development of the individual's metaphysical double, and asserting the importance of a collective morality, by linking the peoples of the diaspora with the Motherland, Africa. In "To Dah-duh in Memoriam," a short story dedicated to her grandmother, Marshall provides insights into the ancestral influence on her writing.<sup>3</sup> Marshall gives thanks to the ancestor who, she writes, "made my being possible, and whose spirit continues to animate my life and work [. . .]. I am, in a word, an unabashed ancestor worshipper" (95). For Marshall, these ancestors are the women who contributed to the development of her twin self or *gros-bon-ange* by forming her consciousness of self and of the world around her. They are the ones who gave her a strong sense of identity and who, especially, inspired her art. In another short story, "From the Poets in the Kitchen," the author details the influence of Caribbean women and the orature of her African/Caribbean heritage on the choice of subject, structure, and language of her oral literature. She notes that for our foremothers, the

oral tradition and the powerful use of language was the "only vehicle readily available to them" to express their creative energies: They "made of it an art form that--in keeping with the African tradition in which art and life are one--was an integral part of their lives" (6). Deeply influenced by the eloquence of her "mothers," Marshall transposes her own experience into her novel by making the act of storytelling crucial to the development of her protagonist's consciousness of identity. When her Great-Aunt Cuney insists that, from the age of seven, the protagonist, Avey, be brought from New York to spend four summers in rural South Carolina, Aunt Cuney initiates her protege into the world of the folk--a world in which music, dance, storytelling, sculpture, herbal medicine are inseparable from daily activities.

Aunt Cuney assumes the ancestral role of griot when, on bi-weekly trips to a place called Ibo Landing in South Carolina, she ceremonially recounts, for Avey's benefit, her personal family history. Avey learns that she was named after Aunt Cuney's grandmother, Avatara, who had come to her in a dream to announce Avey's arrival months before her birth.<sup>4</sup> Since the individual does not exist in isolation from the community, Aunt Cuney links their family history to the myth of the race. Avey learns of

her tribal ancestors, the Ibos, who rejected physical enslavement by walking over the waters from Ibo Landing back to Africa:

[T]he minute those Ibos was brought on shore they just stopped [. . .] and taken a look around. A good long look. Not saying a word. Just studying the place real good [. . .]. and when they got through studying 'em, when they knew just from looking at 'em how those folks was gonna do [. . .]. They just turned [. . .] and walked on back down to the edge of the river here [. . .]. They just kept walking right on out over the river. (38)

Personal and communal history are joined, for, when the Ibos walked back, says Aunt Cuney, her grandmother followed them: "Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos," adds Aunt Cuney (39). Here Marshall employs the Vodun belief in a physical return to Africa after death as both a motif of spiritual transcendence, and of psychological resistance to Western domination. According to Keith Sandiford, the Ibos' refusal to accept Western limitations of time and technology "effectively inaugurated for their Tatem heirs a historical agenda of resistance, denial, and affirmation (377). Just as Aunt Cuney's grandmother, Avatara, mentally left with the Ibos, who refused to be subjected to slavery, so too Aunt Cuney resisted efforts of her church to mentally enslave her by forcing her to

restrain her physical expressions of worship. Instead, she chose to worship at Ibo Landing, founding what the people in Tatem call a new "religion" (34). Her choice to worship at Ibo Landing represented her desire to connect, spiritually, with her ancestors and with Africa. She will pass on the story of the Ibos to Avey, the inheritor of Avatara's mission. Thus, through the oral art of storytelling, ancestor figures ensure the continuity of cultural traditions.

Storytelling is only one of the talents which the ancestor possesses. Another motif that appears constantly in this novel in particular, and in black women's fiction, is the one of second sight or clairvoyance. In this novel, it is noteworthy that all the ancestor figures possess this gift. Avey's earliest experience with clairvoyance occurs in her meeting with Mr. Golla Mack, a "short, thick-set old man with unseeing eyes [. . .] seated in monumental stillness on his tumbledown porch" with one of the walking sticks he was known for making before he went blind, "a snake carved up its length" (35-36). Although not a major figure, Golla Mack serves as a cultural backdrop in this folk setting. With his seeing "sightless eyes" he is linked to the other ancestor figures who all possess an uncanny vision--*li gain connaissance*.

Moreover, Golla Mack's former trade, carving, furthers the links with his ancestral homeland, Africa, where art is functional. Even more significant, Golla Mack's "monumental" calm inserts him into a very distinctive feature of Vodun philosophy, that is, the need to maintain one's emotional equilibrium under most circumstances.

In her book, *African Vodun*, Suzanne Blier discusses the philosophical and psychological underpinning of the term, "Vodun," showing that its essence "lies in the need for one to be calm and composed" (39),<sup>5</sup> which is in direct contradiction to the popular distorted version of frenzied, uncontrolled behavior synonymous with the religion. Blier sums up her study as follows:

[W]ithin the concept of *vodun* there rests a deep-seated commitment to certain forms of human conduct in life.[...] [*V*]odun constitutes a philosophy which places a primacy on patience, calmness, respect, and order both in the context of acquiring life's basic necessities and in the pursuit of those extra benefits which make life at once full and pleasurable. Perhaps reflecting the importance of this idea, a critical part of the annual ceremonies in honor of the family vodun is a procession to a local spring in search of water for offerings and ritual cleansing.[. . .] If what is most powerful and significant in life (the gods) is invisible, unseizable, and unknowable, then one has little choice but to relax at the spring from which life (like water) comes. (40)

Thus Golla Mack's ability to "see" Avey with his sightless eyes, along with his snake carving and his calm

personality, are not just ancestral, but cultural qualities linking him with African spiritual traditions and rendering his presence crucial to the cultural space of South Carolina. Meeting him, therefore, is an essential part of Avey's initiation into black cultural traditions.

This is not to suggest, however, that Vodun, as a way of life, is restricted to rural areas, as Harold Courlander explains in *Haiti Singing*:

Vodoun exists not only in the privacy of a man's home, and in the *hounfor* (temple of the Vodoun priest), it is in the gardens where a man works the earth with a machete, singing, improvising, identifying himself with nature, with the soil he treads with his bared feet; [. . .] it blows with the dust in the cities, like Port-au-Prince and Cap Haitien. There is no place or contingency beyond the influence of the loa or beyond the limits of Vodoun. (7-8)

Crucial in African-American and Vodun worship is a physical connection with the earth. Maya Deren explains its metaphysical significance as follows:

To address oneself to the earth [. . .] to rap upon it in ceremonies, to pour libations upon it, to dig into it and there to deposit offerings, to kneel and touch lips or forehead to it—these are gestures addressed not to the earth itself, but to the cosmos which is contained within it. (36)

Significantly, when years later, the now adult Avey (married to Jay Johnson and living on Halsey Street, New

York) comes home from work, her first action involves making contact with the earth-brown floor:

[She] used to kick off her shoes the moment she came in from work, shed her stockings and start the dusting and picking up in her bare feet [. . .]. Freed of the high-heels her body always felt restored to its proper axis. And the hardwood floor which Jay had rescued from layers of oxblood-colored paint when they first moved in and stained earth brown, the floor reverberating with "Cottontail" and "Lester Leaps In" would be like a *rich nurturing ground from which she had sprung and to which she could always turn for sustenance*. (11-12; emphasis mine)

Avey's actions become a sacred gesture that ritualistically reconnects her physical and spiritual selves. Staining the floor earth brown has transformed their home into a sacred, cultural space; and kicking off her shoes to make physical contact with the "earth" floor expresses a subconscious desire, in the "concrete jungle" of New York, to reconnect symbolically with the nurturing earth. Moreover, the jazz music reverberating in the room re-affirms her attachment to the artistic expressions of the culture that had informed her youthful consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

Another example of Avey's continuing attachment to her culture is evidenced in her passing on the myth of the Ibos--albeit with a certain degree of skepticism--to her family. Jay, her husband, does not doubt the myth. Overworked and underpaid, he finds therapeutic healing (calm) in black cultural rituals. When he returns home on

evenings, for example, Jay--in a similar fashion to his wife--routinely listens to music, jazz, blues, which helps him to re-integrate the two selves he finds necessary to separate in public:

The change that came over him from the moment he stepped in the door! His first act after greeting her was to turn up the volume on the phonograph which would already be playing their favorite records.[. . .] he would lower his tall frame into the armchair, lean his head back, close his eyes, and let Coleman Hawkins, The Count, Lester Young (old Prez himself), The Duke--along with the singers he loved: Mr B., Lady Day, Lil Green, Ella--work their magic, their special mojo on him. Until gradually, under their ministrations, the fatigue and strain of the long day spent doing the two jobs--his and his boss's--would ease from his face, and *his body as he sat up in the chair and stretched would look as if it belonged to him again.* (94; emphasis mine)

Magical perhaps best describes the effect of the music on Jay, who, under the soothing influence of the music, would display "the self that would never be seen down at the store." He would be "open, witty, playful, even outrageous at times: he might suddenly stage an impromptu dance just for the two of them in the living room" (95). Secular music (which in Vodun is not considered distinct from religious music) would give way, on Sundays, to the spirituals. In addition, Jay would often recite for his spellbound family fragments of Langston Hughes' poetry which he had consecrated to memory as a child:



"I bathed in the Euphrates when the dawns were young . . . " he loved to recite, standing in his pajamas in the middle of the living room, while Avey, Sis in her lap, sat listening and eating coffee cake in the armchair. "I built my hut by the Congo and it lulled me/to sleep. I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids/above it." (125)

This poetic evocation of African landmarks--Congo and Nile rivers, the native huts, the pyramids--sustains the memory of the motherland and contributes to Jay's spiritual nourishment.

It is also during this period that Avey and Jay derive pleasure from, and express their love for, each other. African deities, Yemoja and Oya, and the Haitian Erzulie Freda (127) inform their rich sexual life. Similarly, in their trips up the Hudson River, Marshall continues to use motifs that reflect their spiritual connections with the African diaspora. Karen McCarthy Brown, in *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, discusses various methods Haitian vodouists employ to recreate cultural and spiritual spaces in the late twentieth-century urban setting of Brooklyn, New York. Similarly, in *American Voudou*, Rod Davis documents substitutions for and transformations of the material elements of Vodun rituals throughout North America, and argues that these modifications attest not to the disappearance, but to the endurance of this beleaguered

"New World" religion. Given Davis' premise, one can understand the link between the rituals and beliefs in the South Carolina of Avey's youth, and the cultural practices performed during Avey and Jay's early years of marriage. In *Praisesong*, the search for, and the re-creation of cultural spaces is shown to be eminently accessible.

If Vodun is no longer easily recognizable in post-modern African-American artistic expressions—jazz, spirituals, blues, poetry, modern dance, storytelling—this does not diminish the impact of its healing properties. It is during the time of the couple's attachment to African-American cultural traditions, when they find time to take trips up the Hudson, that they are shown to be at peace with themselves and take pleasure in each other, despite the stresses of family and of black, urban life in general. These rituals serve to counteract the oftentimes devastating psychological effects of North American urban life on African Americans. Avey and her husband's creation of nurturing cultural spaces for their family can be interpreted as a subconscious reenactment and reinterpretation of Vodun rituals that play an important role in counteracting stress. The threat of psychic disruption remains, nevertheless, constant.

## Disconnections

Frantz Fanon discusses, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the strong sense of inferiority operating among French West Indians and other peoples in the colonized world through confrontation with racism. Fanon notes that "[a]s long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others" (109). This, in part, accounts for the legendary psychological strength of Schwarz-Bart's heroine and her maternal ancestors. However, Fanon argues, the black man, when he encounters the white world, can no longer judge himself by his own standards:

[T]he Negro has been given two frames of reference in which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him. (110)

In *Praisesong*, Marshall presents this threat of spiritual and psychic disruptions as unrelenting. As early as the age of ten, Avey begins to psychologically distance herself from the metaphysics of her people. Despite Aunt Cuney's three-year-long effort to give her a strong sense of her identity, Avey questions the veracity of the myth of the Ibos who walked across the seas back to Africa:

"But how come they didn't drown, Aunt Cuney?" she asks, although she instantly regrets the question because of the "disappointment and sadness" she sees in her ancestor's look. Aunt Cuney's response is telling: "Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday School book your momma always sends with you?" (39-40). This ancestor's incisive words, or what Gay Wilentz in *Binding Cultures* calls her "impeccable logic" (103), constitute an effective challenge to the Western cultural indoctrination which includes a privileging of certain legends over others.

Challenging the myth also puts into question Avey's role as myth extender--the fact that she was "sent" by Avatara, her namesake, to "fulfill a mission." But without faith in one's myths one becomes disempowered and disconnected; one's spirit, or *gros-bon-ange*, cannot reconcile with "matter" without communal support of the myth. In other words, until Avey privileges her ancestors' story, and accepts her role as myth extender, she will not fully appreciate her identity and cultural location within the diasporic community.

Initially, Avey does not let go of the myth completely. As mentioned earlier, she passes it on to her husband, who at first embraces it. Financial and

emotional stresses of work and family life, however, cause both Avey and Jay to let go of the myth. Jay's happy, playful and culturally rooted self, at home, gives way to the work-obsessed individual who has no time for rest and relaxation; no time for re-enacting the rituals that sustain the spirit. Significantly, it is Avey, the doubter of the myth, who triggers Jay's transformation. Pregnant with their third child, and under great emotional duress, she becomes needlessly jealous of Jay's female colleagues in the workplace, to the point of threatening to leave home with the children. In response, Jay's private, fun-loving self has to depart to make space for the self that can survive the struggle for upward mobility. That personality, in Avey's eyes, is "Jerome," for whom time becomes money. There is no time to relax and to nourish one's spiritual self by nurturing one's cultural space. The price he pays for success is a loss of his self, of the development of his *gros-bon-ange*, symbolized by the removal of his moustache. This new personality, Jerome, is highly critical of his people. Similarly, Avey's letting go of the name "Avatara" symbolizes her movement away from the self that, because of Aunt Cuney's early intervention, was anchored, within Vodun culture and within the black community.

The novel opens with the now middle-aged, widowed, and wealthy Avey on a luxury cruise to the Caribbean with two female companions. Avey no longer recognizes her self in the mirror. Her home in North White Plains, and the ship, the *Bianca Pride*, literally and figuratively indicate the Johnsons' movement away from Vodun traditions, represented by Halsey Street.<sup>7</sup> But departure from their physical and psychological nurturing ground does not bring the Johnsons any closer to acceptance by the white world. Instead, when African-Americans move into North White Plains, Euro-Americans move out of the neighborhood, "the Archers with their blue-eyed, tow-headed children, and the Weinsteins "were the only ones for blocks around who had not sold and fled" (45). Even when "white flight" is physically impossible, as on the luxury cruise, Avey still feels herself psychologically worlds apart from Euro-Americans. The fifty-odd tables "were like islands, it suddenly occurred to her, and she felt oddly chilled; each table an island separated from the others on the sea of Persian carpeting that covered the room" (47). The tables metaphorically illustrate her feeling of isolation:

[E]ven those who sat directly facing her at nearby tables somehow gave the impression of having their backs turned to her and her companions. It had to do

with the expression in their eyes, which seemed to pass cleanly through them whenever they glanced across, and even, ironically, with the strained smiles some of them occasionally flashed their way. (47)

Avey's acceptance of "invisibility," which she "had trained herself not to notice, or if she did, not to feel anything one way or the other about it" (47), indicates the extent of her psychic dissolution in desiring to be accepted by a non-responsive, often hostile white community. Consequently, she becomes caught in a cultural and temporal no-man's land: alienated from her African-American community but rejected by the white community; unable to fully partake of the present, because of her feeling of malaise on the ship, yet refusing to embrace her past.

Ironically, the protagonist, by her very existence, subverts Western time. She is the re-incarnation of Aunt Cuney's grandmother, Avatara, "sent" to fulfill "a mission she couldn't even name." But Avey gets lost in privileging Western materialism over the spiritual values of her ancestors. According to Simon Gikandi, in *Writing in Limbo*, Avey's crisis of consciousness develops because in espousing the notion of temporality as a form of progression from the past to the future, she has forgotten her ancestral duties (194). Avey has not forgotten her

ancestral duties, however; she has simply refused to consider them. She may "understand the myth [. . .] as profound resistance and not simple flight" according to McCluskey (333), but while Aunt Cuney's story of triumph and liberation strongly impresses her, Avey dismisses the myth and its message of psychological healing and liberation. Hers was a deliberate act of psycho-cultural distancing: "It had taken her years to rid herself of the notion" that she was chosen for a mission (42). Avey Johnson's crisis of identity is closely related to her uneasy relationship to the "black voice" and her past, notes Gikandi (199); in other words, Avey's refusal to heed the call to service of her ancestors leads to her spiritual malaise, manifested physically.

The plot in *Praisesong* centers on the protagonist's journey back to self, in space and time, in response to the loas/ancestors' call to service. In the first section of the novel, aptly entitled "Runagate" (departure), Avey decides to abandon the luxury cruise (to the utter consternation of her companions) after a troubling dream of Aunt Cuney, and a feeling of physical malaise. In the dream, Aunt Cuney beckons Avey to accompany her on a trip to Ibo Landing. Dressed to attend a dinner with her husband, Avey refuses to go and pulls away her arm,



dislodging the stole draped over it. Angered by the sight of her stole on the ground, Avey begins to fight Aunt Cuney, trading blow for blow and "ignoring the look of anguished love and disappointment in the old woman's gaze" (45). The dream struggle, and Avey's experience of physical malaise the next day while attempting to eat a rich dessert in the ship's sumptuous Versailles Room, have been rightly interpreted by Wilentz and others as symbolic of the conflict of values between the materialistic lifestyle (represented by the stole) and the spiritual (represented by the ancestor, Aunt Cuney). Her malaise can also be viewed as the punishment meted out by the loa when the chosen candidate refuses to heed the call.

Disembarking on the Caribbean island of Grenada with the intention of taking the next plane home, Avey encounters an unusual crowd intent on boarding rickety boats to an unknown destination, which she later discovers to be the out-island of Carriacou. Marshall emphasizes Avey's construction of difference through language. Confronted with her Caribbean brethren, she is repelled by their easy familiarity with her and decides that the people must be unaware that she is a "stranger," a "visitor," a "tourist," and wonders:

What was the matter with these people? It was as if the moment they caught sight of her standing there, their eyes immediately stripped her of everything she had on and dressed her in one of the homemade cotton prints the women were wearing, whose West Indian colors as Thomasina Moore called them seemed to add to the heat. Their eyes also banished the six suitcases at her side, and placing a small overnight bag like the ones they were carrying in her hand, they were all set to take her along wherever it was they were going.(72)

Her adoption of a Western, middle-class travel terminology in attempting to distinguish herself from the Caribbean masses underscores her desired alliance with white culture and her alienation from her people. Yet the effort is obviously futile. This is reinforced when a man mistakes her for someone else, immediately apologizes, and then tells her: "Don' ever let anybody tell you, my lady, that you ain' got a twin in this world!" (72). The twin metaphor aptly underscores the fundamental bond among all "New World" Africans--a bond that renders useless any trivial distinctions we might attempt to make among ourselves.

Whereas the white world refuses to "see" her despite her upper middle-class Western material trappings, the islanders from Carriacou disregard these superficial signs of difference and embrace her as one of their own. Clearly the people of Carriacou do not operate out of two frames of reference or "double consciousness" for, as

Fanon points out, it is those who come into direct contact with and attempt to assimilate into white culture who suffer various degrees of psychic dissolution. In contrast to Avey Johnson's disconnection from her community, the islanders from Carriacou--racially healthy and "undiminished"--are going to Carriacou for their yearly ritual of rendering homage to the ancestors.

### **Reconnections: Place and Time**

The Caribbean as neo-colonial space harbors the legacy of slavery and colonialism. Yet the numerical superiority of African descendants--except in the island of Trinidad and in the former British Guiana where there exist an almost equal number of East Indian descendants--has resulted in the predominance and persistence of African-derived traditions. In some areas which have been less subjected to Western cultural and socio-economic invasions, African cultural traditions are even more prevalent. The island of Carriacou is one such area. According to Michael G. Smith in *Kinship and Community in Carriacou*, this Caribbean island has retained a full fledged ancestor cult, in which the "Big Drum" or Nation Dance "is still the representative ritual form" (9-10). The discovery is not without significance, for Carriacou will become the ideal site for Avey's spiritual rebirth.

These out-islanders are depicted as almost mythic figures, admired but considered "strange" even by local Caribbean standards. They form a cohesive, unified, and distinctive group, prosperous within the larger Grenadian community, but fiercely proud of, and determined to maintain, their separate group identity: their names, their language and customs. Their connectedness to African traditions distinguish them from the Grenadian in the mainland. When Avey hears the patois they speak, she is reminded of the first time she heard it in Martinique several days earlier, and she is also reminded of "the way the people spoke in Tatem long ago" (67). The many links Marshall constantly draws among the peoples of the Diaspora derive from the Vodun philosophy of holism which, as I have stated earlier, emphasizes among other things, physical and spiritual oneness.

In order to make the re-connection between the mind and the body, Avey must undergo a rite of passage of death and rebirth that includes confession, cleansing, and confirmation. Maya Deren provides a description of this rite in Vodun initiation ceremonies:

the ceremony of initiation is a process of death and resurrection, a re-creation of spiritual genesis. The first phase is one of purification, both physical and spiritual. It begins with a confession at the Catholic Church, and another to the houngan, who

conveys it to the loa who is the master of the hounfor. The candidate then withdraws from the world for several days, and this solitude is devoted to an intensification of the purification. He meditates and bathes repeatedly. Both the body and the spirit are cleansed of the past, and he is innocent once more. (220)

Avey enters the purification phase when she is unable to find a plane that day leaving for "home" and overnights at a hotel. That night she experiences hallucinations of her last twenty years with Jay, and other stages of her youth, ending with a repetition of Aunt Cuney's desperate call to her: "Come/Won't you come . . .?" [. . .] "Come/Will you come . . .?" (143). The process continues the next morning when Avey goes for a walk on the beach. It is presented as a mythic journey back in time, beginning, symbolically, with her forgetting her watch. Marshall makes her most direct reference to Vodun in the opening dedication of the section. This invocation prayer in all Vodun ceremonies, "Papa Legba, ouvri barriere pou' mwe," announces the entrance of Lebert Joseph, cast in the image and role of Papa Legba, god of the crossroads.<sup>7</sup> According to Wilentz, Lebert Joseph, an ancient, androgynous figure with "lines etched over his face like the scarification marks of a thousand tribes" (161), opens for Avey the gates to the world of the ancestors in order for her to "articulate and move toward reconciliation of the conflicting aspects of

her African-American personality" (111). Lebert (Legba) Joseph's role as spiritual guide is clearly established. Joseph re-articulates the islanders' spiritual links to their homeland, Carriacou, which are tenacious, despite their living on the economically more profitable island of Grenada:

Just because we live over this side don' mean we's from this place, you know. Even when we's born here we remain Carriacou people [. . .] And come time for the excursion we gone! Everybody together. We don' miss a year.[. . .] Even when I had to get up from a sickbed to go, I was there.(163-64)

Carriacou and its inhabitants, in this novel, become paradigmatic of Africa and its inhabitants. According to Pettis, Lebert Joseph, keeper of the gates, is the ancestor through whom Marshall, "fuses the mythic and the real" (118-19). His cultural affiliation with Africa is evident. He identifies himself as a "Chamba" on his paternal side, and a "Manding" on his mother's side, before listing various African nations and asking Avey to which she belongs:

"[W]hat's your nation?" he asked her . . . "Arada?" He waited. "Cromanti maybe . . .?" And he again waited. "Yarraba then . . .? Moko . . .?" On and on he recited the list of names [. . .]. "Temne . . .? Is you a Temne maybe? Banda?" (167)

Ironically, Avey, the child of Ibo ancestors, is so alienated from her past that she is even uncertain that

Lebert Joseph is referring to her origins: "What are these names . . . She thought she heard in them the faint rattle of the necklace of cowrie shells and amber Marion always wore. Africa? Did they have something to do with Africa?" (167). Still, Avey finds the conversation so outrageous she can only conclude that the man must be "senile." Her inability to respond dramatically illustrates the dilemma of "New World" Africans at a spiritual crossroads because of our loss of collective identity. The fact that Lebert Joseph inquires of her ethnicity rather than her name, indicates the difference in his scale of priorities for he clearly privileges her collective kinship over her personal identity.

Avey's conversation with Lebert Joseph, advances her entrance into mythical time. He appears to straddle different time frames and evokes an era when tribal identification mattered more than personal identity. Indeed, for this ancestor, time seems to stand still. In addition to knowing the names of all the tribes, he talks about a song commemorating an incident during slavery as if he had been present during that period:

From the anguish in the man's voice, in his face, in his far-seeing gaze, it didn't seem that the story was just something he had heard, but an event he had been witness to. He might have been present, might have seen with his own eyes the husband bound in

chains for Trinidad, the wife—iron on her ankles and wrists and in a collar around her neck—sold off to Haiti, and the children, Zabette and Ti Walter (he even knew the names), left orphaned behind. (177)

Lebert Joseph's movement between time periods is reinforced by his physical changes:

Where was the walking stick? It had not reappeared since he had abandoned it to sing the Beg Pardon on his knees. And what of the crippled dwarf of a thousand years she had seen or perhaps not seen at the crossroads earlier? Not a trace of him was evident. He had been packed away for another time in the trunk containing the man's endless array of personas. Another self had been chosen for the fete, one familiar to her, because he was once again the Lebert Joseph she remembered from the rum shop, who had amazed her by dancing the Juba over in the sunlit doorway with the force and agility of someone half his age. (243)

Dancing the Juba for Avey, "his defects and the wear and tear of his eighty-or perhaps even ninety-odd years fell away and he was dancing after a time with the strength and agility of someone half his age" (179). This remarkable feat of rejuvenation replicates Vodun possession. Later, Lebert (Legba), leading the way to the Beg Pardon ceremony, shifts again between times:

[T]he man suddenly appeared older (if such a thing were possible!), of an age beyond reckoning, his body more misshapen and infirm than ever before. He would have been unable to stand without the aid of the walking stick. Another eighty or ninety years might have been heaped on his back since she had seen him a few hours ago. . . . That was one moment. The next—as if to confirm that she had been indeed seeing things—the crippled figure up ahead shifted to his good leg, pulled his body as far upright as it could



go (throwing off at least a thousand years as he did), and was hurrying forward with his brisk limp to take her arm.(233)

Lebert Joseph speaks of the present and the future in reference to the past. He insists, for example, that the ancestors must be venerated:

Each year this time they does look for us to come and give them their remembrance. [. . .] If not they'll get vex and cause you nothing but trouble. They can turn your life around in a minute, you know. [. . .] Oh, they can be disagreeable, you see them there. Is their age, oui, and the lot of suffering they had to put up with in their day. (165)

Having, herself, refused to heed the call, Avey's reaction once again underscores her alienation from the rituals that recapture this mythical time: "what was this voodoo about lighted candles, old parents, big drums and the rest? (166). Out of touch with her ancestors, she condescendingly dismisses rituals as "voodoo"--with all of the negative connotation the word continues to generate in Western popular imagination. But the farseeing Lebert Joseph understands the source of Avey's spiritual malaise and, in an echo of Malidoma Somé, laments a similar loss of connection between his own descendants, scattered throughout the Caribbean and North America, and the ancestors. During the "Beg Pardon," he asks forgiveness for these lost descendants who will never know their gods.

Significantly, the initial encounter between Avey and Lebert Joseph includes a confession which, as Deren indicates, is the first phase of the initiation. The normally reserved Avey with her acquired Marion Andersen poise, cannot understand her compulsion to recount the experiences that lead her to leave the ship:

Could this be Avey Johnson talking so freely? It was the place: the special light that filled it and the silence, as well as the bowed figure across the table who didn't appear to be listening. They were drawing the words from her, forcing them out one by one.(170)

As she talks to this total stranger, Lebert Joseph begins quietly studying her from beneath his lowered brow.[. . .] There was no thought or image, no hidden turn of her mind he did not have access to. Those events of the past three days which she withheld or overlooked, the feelings she sought to mask, the meanings that were beyond her—he saw and understood them all from the look he bent on her.(171)

Joseph, the diviner "who possessed ways of seeing that went beyond mere sight and ways of knowing that outstripped ordinary intelligence "*li gain connaissance*," recalls the Ibos who, according to Aunt Cuney, had

seen things that day you and me don't have the power-to-see. 'Cause those pure-born Africans was peoples my gran' said could see in more ways than one. The kind can tell you 'bout things happened long before they was born and things to come long before they's dead.(37-8)

In accordance with his role as diviner and healer, Lebert Joseph's prescribes a cure for the malaise to which Avey

confesses: "You must come, oui. On the excursion." "You must come today-self so you can see the Juba done proper" (180). This urgent, direct call to serve replays Aunt Cuney's dream call, and again, Avey resists. In the ensuing struggle, although Joseph does not touch her, she feels "as if he had reached out and taken her gently but firmly now by the wrist" and "she almost jerked back her hand" (183). Avey's unwillingness, followed by an attempt to leave, triggers a resurgence of the malaise she had experienced on the ship: "a peculiar clogged and bloated feeling in her stomach and under her heart which could not be accounted for" (181), forcing her to accept Lebert Joseph's invitation to accompany him to the island of Carriacou to witness the Juba or Nation Dance--a dance dedicated to the ancestors. Significantly, it is here that Lebert Joseph will discover the answer to his initial question of her identity: "You know," he said, "I watched you good last night at the fete and I can't say for sure but I feels you's an Arada, oui" (252).

The next section, aptly termed "Lavé Tête," (literally "Washing of the Head"),<sup>8</sup> corresponds to the physical cleansing phase of the initiation. It takes two forms: internal and external, and unfolds in two phases.

In the first, Avey experiences "sea sickness," a material manifestation of her spiritual malaise. The physical emptying of her bowels, graphically portrayed, represents a process of purification throughout which she is assisted by elderly women on board. They console and protect her from the shocks of the turbulent waters as well as from the eyes of the other passengers: "their lips close to her ears they spoke to her, soothing, low-pitched words which not only sought to comfort and reassure her, but which from their tone even seemed to approve of what was happening" (205). Wilentz points out that Aunt Cuney's force resonates in these characters' relationships with Avey, and much of the imagery surrounding the figures in Carriacou mirrors Aunt Cuney's presence (*Binding Cultures* 110). Their supporting roles are similar to the *Hounsi* who assist the *houngan/manbo* in the Vodun initiation process.

The second phase of the purification takes place on the island of Carriacou under the direction of another ancestor figure, Lebert Joseph's daughter, Rosalie Parvay. She is a younger replica of himself: "the man had not only made her in his image physically: the small sinewy frame, the walk, the gestures, he had also passed on to her his special powers of seeing and knowing. *Li gain*

*connaissance*" (218). Rosalie Parvay cleans and rubs down Avey with oil. This part of the initiation recalls Deren's description:

in the chamber where the candidate is secluded.[. . .] a purifying bath has been prepared, and after this final cleansing, the candidate is completely enclosed in a white sheet, as if in the shroud of a corpse.[. . .] This is a state in which that person's past has died, has been completely annihilated. In this condition of ultimate purity, and here, upon this bed where the leaves of the original world of the race lie with the leaves of the original womb, the new being is gradually conceived. For four days the body is anointed with oil at noon. (220-21)

Marshall's inclusion in Book IV of the "laying on of hands," is religious ritual common in African-American and other cultural practices that combines the sensual with the process of spiritual rebirth. The practice is also central to the African concept that the body and spirit are one. The entire process suggests a merging of the physical with the spiritual to create a new being since Avey's response is given in terms of sexual release and conception:

[U]nder the vigorous kneading and pummeling, Avey Johnson became aware of a faint stinging as happens in a limb that's fallen asleep once it's aroused, and a warmth could be felt as if the blood there had been at a standstill, but was now tentatively getting under way again. And this warmth and the faint stinging reached up the entire length of her thighs [. . .] Then, slowly, they radiated out into her loins [. . .]. The warmth, the stinging sensation that was both pleasure and pain passed up through the emptiness at her center. Until finally they reached

her heart. And as they encircled her heart and it responded, there was the sense of a chord being struck. All the tendons, nerves and muscles which strung her together had been struck a powerful chord, and the reverberation could be heard in the remotest corners of her body. (223-24)

Avey Johnson's experience of sexual fulfillment at the end of this purification ritual parallels the period in her marriage to Jay when their closeness to their cultural heritage corresponded to a rich sexual life and was informed by African female deities—Yemoja, Oya—and the Haitian goddess of love, Erzulie Freda. Significantly, Marshall's drawing on imagery from the African and Vodun pantheon, suggests her awareness of the single origin of these deities.

Carole Boyce Davies and others have identified the celebration of the Nation Dance, in *Praisesong*, as the culmination of Avey's personal awareness, her acknowledgment of her heritage, and the acceptance of her mission. Davies comments that the Nation Dance is a "documented ritual enactment of Pan-African unity" and therefore represents the coming together of all those of the African diaspora" (qtd. in Wilentz 112). The process that Avey Johnson has gone through is one with which all members of oppressed groups must wrestle if they are ever

to achieve an integrated sense of self. Marshall clearly states that objective in "Shaping the World of My Art":

An oppressed people cannot overcome their oppressors and take control of their lives until they have a clear and truthful picture of all that has gone before, until they begin to use their history creatively. This knowledge of one's culture, one's history, serves as an ideological underpinning for the political, social and economic battles they must wage. It is the base upon which they must build.(107)

Once Avey reclaims the past, she is determined to wage these political, social and economic battles. Her return to her community corresponds to Joseph Campbell's explanation of the myth of the hero in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.  
(30)

Although Campbell describes a physical journey, he argues that the quest is symbolic, actually representing an inward journey culminating in encounters with previously unrecognized aspects of one's psyche and/or with the cosmos. Marshall's protagonist also returns from her spiritual quest with a new consciousness and a desire to share her new-found knowledge with her community. She plans to enlist the aid of her daughter, Marion, the only

culturally and politically conscious of Avey's children. Unimpressed by trappings of wealth and power, Marion had tried to dissuade her mother from going on the luxury cruise; had denounced her mother's conspicuous consumption, her choice of "bourgeois" companions and place of residence. Instead, Marion's clear understanding of history leads her to dedicate her life to the service of her people, and in particular to the children rejected by society whom she calls her "sweet lepers." Avey will "enlist Marion in her cause" as she finally accepts her role as myth extender and will "speak of the excursion to others elsewhere" (255). Her target will be those most susceptible to losing their cultural grounding: "those young, bright, fiercely articulate token few for whom her generation had worked the two and three jobs. [. . .] unaware, unprotected, lacking memory and a necessary distance of the mind" (255). Abena P. Busia argues that this (re)memory is not regressive but retrogressive: "The past is not reclaimed for its own sake but because without a recognition of it there can be no understanding of the present and no future" (27). Marshall successfully demonstrates the necessity of both resisting and integrating Western and African-derived constructs: "to take only what was needed and to run" (139). In this



sense, she articulates a Vodun aesthetic of syncretism without assimilation, a strategy that enabled Vodun to survive, to transcend time and place by articulating a distinctive cosmology that promotes psychic health in the hostile environment of the West.

Marshall's experience of growing up in a Caribbean household in North America has played a major role in her ability to look beyond the artificial boundaries that have divided peoples of African descent. Critics have noted that in all her work, she privileges the Caribbean as a place where a return to an African consciousness, and acceptance of our myths, is more clearly visualized. She goes further than the other authors in this study in conveying a sense of the urgency of the need for African peoples to not simply embrace our gods, but to become politically active by telling our story to those most in danger of forgetting and losing their cultural identity. Through Avey, she sounds a call to the collective people of the African diaspora to recognize our Vodun-steeped heritage, and embrace it, lest we succumb to zombification.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> For the African, a diminished spiritual connection is directly related to adoption of Western values by the city dwellers. In the Caribbean, the loss of ancestral links,

in space and time, is exacerbated by the legacy of colonialism; and the racist practices of a dominant Western culture in the case of North America.

<sup>2</sup> Unlike other ethnic groups who left their homelands (in search of adventure and riches, or to escape political or penal punishment) and whose cultural ties to their homeland were not severely strained, the African diasporic story, as mentioned in the previous chapter, is one of physical and spiritual disruption, alienation and disconnection. Separation from homeland and from community continued in the twentieth century as political and socio-economic pressures forced large-scale migrations to North America.

<sup>3</sup> Identified by Marshall as the most autobiographical of her stories, it deals with a visit which Marshall, as a nine-year-old, American-born child, paid to her grandmother in Barbados.

<sup>4</sup> Bringing Avey into the world as "Avatara" reflects the African belief in reincarnation as well as the importance of naming. See Mbiti (154-57).

<sup>5</sup> Suzanne Blier provides etymologies of the term "Vodun": "Both people gave the salient meaning of vo as 'to rest' or 'to relax,' and dun as 'to draw water.' Their translations of vodun, 'rest to draw water,' have important philosophical and psychological grounding. According to Sagbadju, the first of these diviners: "One says vodun, 'put yourself at ease to draw the water,' [because] if you work until you are debilitated and you rest quietly for a bit, your body will be at ease. When your body is at ease, the exhaustion will leave your body, and you will be well" [. . .]. The second diviner, Ayido, bases his etymology on similar ideas:

When one says vodun it is because in this life, there is a pool that is below, and one draws from it. One sees pool in the forests . . . if you go to these places, you should relax and sit first before drawing the water and returning home with it. If you are in a hurry you will fall into the pool. That is why one says, "If one comes into this world it is at a pool that one arrives." One should rest first before drawing. If you are in too much of a hurry, you will fall into the pool. That is what one means when one says vodun [. . .] (39).

<sup>6</sup> Joyce Pettis, in *Toward Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction*, notes the significance of black cultural expressions--jazz, blues, poetry, dance--valued for their stabilizing qualities in the psychological space of one's home (124).

<sup>7</sup> Both names symbolize the alienating white culture which ultimately claims Jay's identity and threatens Avey's.

<sup>8</sup> In Dahomey, writes Maya Deren, as "principle of life, as the initial procreative whole, Legba was both man and woman [. . .]. As the navel of the world, or as its womb, Legba is addressed in prayers at childbirth with the phrase which signals him: "Open the road for me . . . do not let any evil spirits bar my path." (96-7)

<sup>8</sup> See Courlander (9) and Herskovits' (144).descriptions of the *laver tête* ceremony

## CONCLUSION

The Western imagination is largely ignorant of the positive and holistic conception of life involved in the Vodun religion. Yet, this study shows that for three significant female novelists of the African diaspora, Vodun metaphysics and philosophy provides a means not only of valorizing black culture, but also offering spiritual (or psychological) liberation from the Western values that have been assimilated by persons of African descent in the "New World."

The texts—Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et Vent sur Telumee Miracle*, and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*—all feature a central female protagonist, yet represent diverse linguistic, geographical, and cultural characteristics within the African diaspora. Each protagonist is called to undertake a journey in the fashion of the "universal" mythic quest highlighted by such writers as Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade. The quest is ultimately spiritual, and the novels champion a spirituality grounded in a holistic view of life. Specific references and allusions to Vodun beliefs and rituals anchor the texts firmly within a Vodun cosmology or worldview.

The protagonists are ushered on their figurative and/or physical journeys by ancestor figures, just as spiritual guides usher a Vodun neophyte through initiation trials. Allusions to the god Papa Legba--who opens the gates to the world of the spirits--or to Erzulie--goddess of love, represented by the Christian mother of God--underscore the significance of the ancestor figures in the novels. The protagonists also are invariably assisted on their journeys by members of the community, in the fashion of the Vodun hounsi.

Furthermore, performative rituals--singing, dancing, drumming and storytelling--are essential in the protagonists' coming to spiritual rebirth, or full consciousness of the interconnectedness of self, community and the spirit. These oral acts are significant features of black folk culture in general, and of Vodun ceremonies in particular. The protagonists must learn about, and participate actively in communal folklife and folk customs that are distinctively Vodun. For example, Janie, Télumée and Avey each participate in dance at a climactic point in their spiritual journeys. I have argued that this moment in each novel symbolizes Vodun "possession," the point at which a loa enters a neophyte who has finally let go of the ego and fully embraces the spiritual community. For

the "possessed," writes Joan Dayan, "dance is not a loss of identity but rather the surest way back to the self, to an identity lost, submerged, and denigrated" (14).

Because they are black females, the protagonists' quest for spirituality/identity is complex. Each central female figure not only is a victim of the colonialism or neo-colonialism that forms the subtext of each novel, but also of sexism. The novelists recognize that the subaltern position of the black female is as debilitating to her as the twin evils of racism and colonialism. In each novel, the subversive strategies of Vodun become a liberating force enabling the women to assert themselves and/or their voice. By making Vodun an instrument of the women's celebration of a creative self, the authors illustrate the "womanist" power which Houston Baker identifies as a prime characteristic of the Vodun religion.

Vodun belief recognizes life as a battle between good and evil forces, and the authors present such an interplay within the worlds of their protagonists. Though they valorize black culture, the novels also give full play to the disruptions, physical and psychic, from which African diasporic peoples have suffered. Characters display double-consciousness, psychic dislocations, split selves,

loss of self-esteem and self-hatred--all forms of alienation, I argue, which are associated with the Vodun concept of zombification.

Beyond recognizing the destructive consequences of imperialism, the novels systematically hold up Western individualism and materialism to severe scrutiny. Significantly, none of the heroines has acquired additional material riches at the conclusion of her quest. Indeed, Télumée remains to the end of her days as poor as the proverbial church mouse. Neither do these black females achieve permanent marital bliss in the fashion of the Western fairy tale. Instead, once they have acquired self-knowledge through complete integration with the folk community, the protagonists return, alone, to tell the tale and contribute to the spiritual uplift of their community. Janie returns to her hometown and tells her story to Pheoby, to whom she delegates its retelling to the community. Télumée, who never leaves the folk community, tells her story in the act of narrating the novel. Avey plans to return to the United States and recruit the aid of her daughter, Marion, the only politically and culturally conscious of her three children, in seeking out and telling her story to young African Americans enjoying the hard-won material gains of

their parents but lacking cultural memory. Answering the call to serve the loas, therefore, involves putting oneself at the service not simply of the gods, but of the entire community.

Vodun as a way of life, as a system of beliefs that encompasses an entire worldview, is the driving force in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle* and *Praisesong for the Widow*. Yet, there are significant differences in the authors' transposition of Vodun tradition into a mentally and spiritually liberating philosophy for a twentieth century audience. Hurston, a participant but also a unique voice within the literary movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, offers black folk culture as an antidote to loss of black identity when many black intellectuals embraced white cultural values as they sought political equality. Subversively, Hurston uses a Vodun aesthetic to suggest that members of the African diaspora need to return to, rather than dissociate themselves from, their African heritage as a positive and creative approach to life. Concurrently, she questions assimilation of Western materialistic values in the diasporic community. In contrast to Schwarz-Bart and Marshall, who employ traditional ancestor figures to direct their protagonists toward a spiritual quest,



Hurston presents Nanny, Janie's biological ancestor, as a broken figure who sees marriage for material advancement as the black woman's only hope for delivery from drudgery. In place of Nanny, Hurston offers the unlikely blues-man figure of Tea Cake as the true ancestral guide who will teach Janie to participate fully in community life. One sees here Hurston's modification of a Vodun trope to take into account the lingering effects of slavery on the post-emancipation black community, stressing the essential spirituality of Vodun, rather than adherence to trivial material details, such as locating the ancestor in an elderly androgynous or female individual. Overall, Hurston sets up the Vodun worldview as a kind of standard to which the African people may turn to keep their minds and spirits, if not their bodies, free of white domination.

Schwarz-Bart, casting herself imaginatively into early twentieth-century Guadeloupe from the vantage point of the 1970s, celebrates an unwritten past, suggesting that African peoples not only may find a source of pride and emulation in their African roots, but also in much more recent ancestors, who, despite their virtual slavery under colonial government, triumph over their physical circumstances through the state of their "heart,"

celebrating and loving the life inside and outside themselves. Writing in the 1980s, Marshall, as an African-American woman of Caribbean descent, somewhat surprisingly makes the most overt plea for African-descended peoples to re-embrace the Vodun religion. Direct references to Vodun gods, rituals and communication with the invisible world abound throughout the text, and the novel's central plot is structured as a Vodun initiation ceremony. Far more than Schwarz-Bart, or even Hurston, Marshall seems to find African-Americans' disconnection with their cultural roots a distressingly urgent matter. Moreover, *Praisesong for the Widow*--perhaps due to Marshall's dual American and Caribbean alliances--emphasizes appalling disconnections within the diasporic community.

Viewed chronologically in terms of publication, the novels in this study hint at an increasing loss of connection with African-derived folk traditions among the widespread people of the African diaspora. The threat in all cases derives from Western culture, but takes different forms. Hurston writes to celebrate a living black folk culture denied but not suppressed in the 1930s. Schwarz-Bart, too, celebrates Afro-Caribbean folkways, but in part due to her choice to set the story in the past,

loss of cultural heritage does not loom as a threat. The nemesis of the Lougandor women and other impoverished folk under colonial oppression is physical survival. On the other hand, Marshall details the soul-destroying effect of consumerism and the struggle for material advancement that constitutes mainstream American culture and threatens to displace more traditional cultures. The holistic Vodun philosophy is a last chance for spiritual and physical healing and hope. According to Avey, her story must be told. Although Janie's and Télumée's stories are significant and life-affirming, both seem satisfied, once they have told their story to another, that they have fulfilled their part in the transmission of culture. Insofar as she speaks for Marshall, Avey cannot tell her story to enough people, including strangers. The threat of cultural dispossession and consequent zombification is unrelenting.

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## VITA

Maria Thecla Smith received her bachelor of arts degree in French, Spanish, and Linguistics from the University of the West Indies, Trinidad, in 1979. She has taught French, Spanish and English in Trinidad, and English as a second language in various high schools and professional colleges in France. In 1989, she received a master of arts degree (maîtrise) in French and Comparative Literature from the Université de Poitiers, France, followed by, in 1991, an advanced graduate degree (Diplôme d'Études Approfondies) in French and Comparative Literature from the Université de Bordeaux, France,.

She entered the English Department doctoral program at Louisiana State University, specializing in anglophone and francophone African diasporic literatures. She will receive the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from Louisiana State University in May, 2000.

# DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

**Candidate:** Maria Thecla Smith

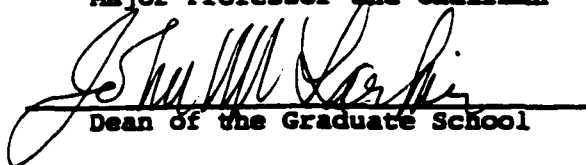
**Major Field:** English

**Title of Dissertation:** Slain in the Spirit: A Vodun Aesthetic in Selected Works of Simone Schwarz-Bart, Zora Neale Hurston, and Paule Marshall

**Approved:**

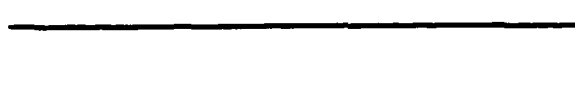
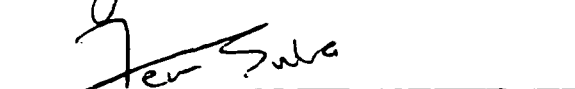
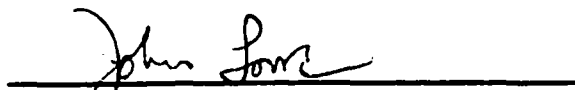


Major Professor and Chairman



Dean of the Graduate School

## EXAMINING COMMITTEE:



**Date of Examination:**

12/09/1999

